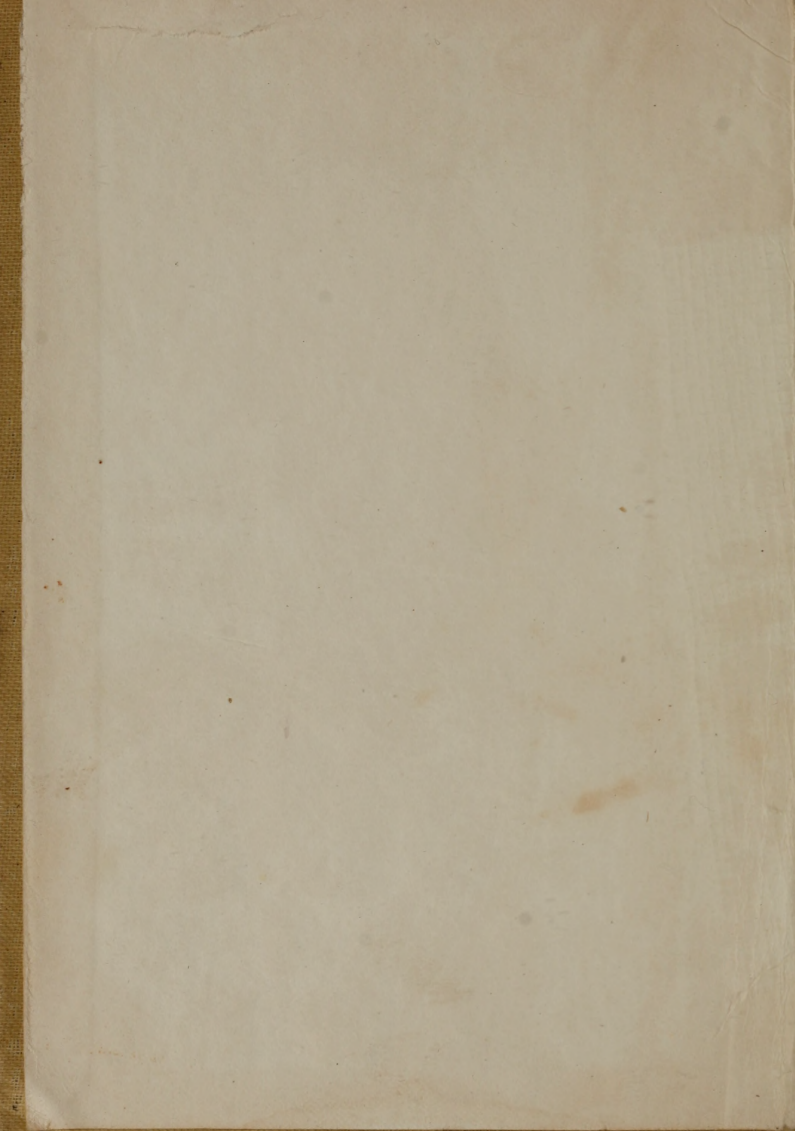
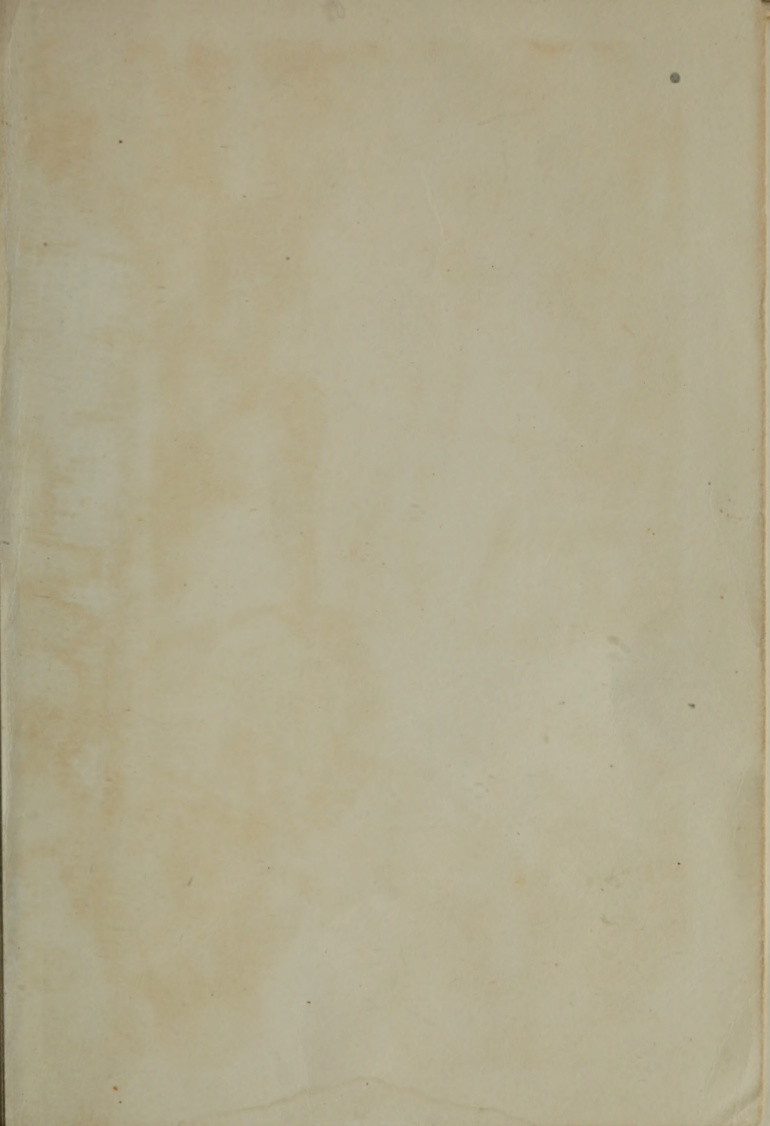


BACK
TO THE
OLD HOME

HAY





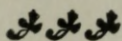


BACK TO THE

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BY

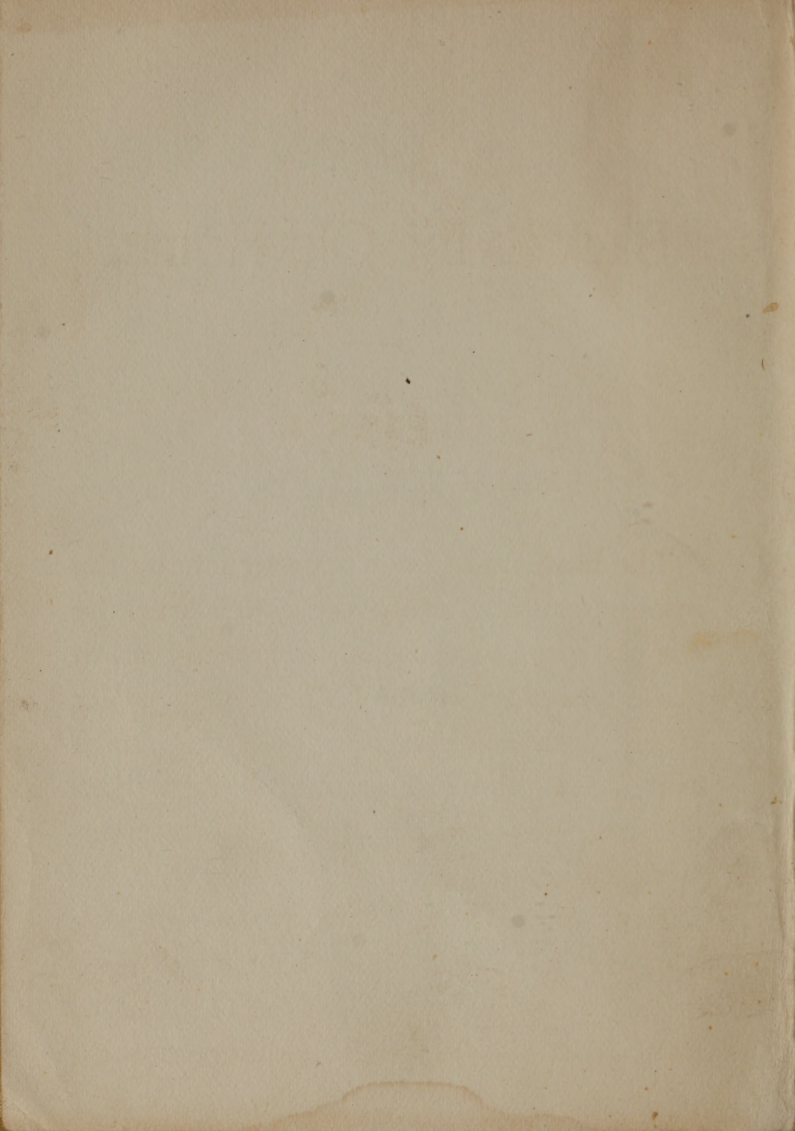
MARY CECIL HAY.



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Back to the Old Home.

CHAPTER I.

LEFT ALONE.

The Hall stood in an opening among the trees, much further up the valley than the low old farm, where I, a very lonely lad in those old days, lived and worked under Uncle Joshua's iron rule; and only from the gate of the hill orchard could we see the wide gray house and the smooth emerald lawn before it.

Even from there it always looked very far away, I thought—quite as if it belonged to a different world. Indeed, I liked to fancy that it *did* belong to a different world

from mine, and that no sorrow and no unrest could enter it. And it sometimes did me good to stand there beside the gate and look at it, though I knew Uncle Joshua would have called this a childish fancy. Yet I remember that it never made me idle over the tasks he gave me, or impatient over his hard and moody silence or reproofs; and, as I said, I think those few quiet minutes, now and then—while I dreamed over the peace and joy and refinement of this beautiful home—(of which, beyond its soft gray walls, I knew almost as little as I knew of the blue sky above me), and while I forgot the loneliness and want of love and pleasure in my own home—did me no harm.

I used to love the picture best by moonlight, but of course I could see it very seldom so. Oh, the great peace that lay upon it then, while I could fancy Miss Mary gliding noiselessly about the quiet rooms, or standing by the mullioned windows, sing-

ing softly in the deep gladness of her heart ! But was there a time when I could *not* picture her ? When the sunset light burned on the windows, I saw her sitting at the organ, the notes of which I had sometimes heard, dressed in white, and looking like the angels my mother used to tell me of. And when I could pause beside the orchard gate on winter evenings, and see the fire-light shining from the windows out into the night (like the great warm generous heart of the old Hall), in a hundred different attitudes, I could picture Miss Mary then, flitting about the lighted rooms in dazzling robes like a Fairy Princess, reading in the fireside glow with her head bent above most wonderful pictures, or dancing in a scene of sweet unreal enchantment.

But—ah, yes, it might have grown into an idle and unboyish habit, as Uncle Joshua said it was ! Uncle Joshua had in charity given the orphan lad a home, and it was but natural that in return he should expect

the lad's whole time in service—thus had I always answered the question of my life, trying to leave every wider question undiscussed, in my reticent, dogged way. So I tried very hard to leave this habit off. It was slow work though, and I never quite succeeded until that day when Miss Mary herself surprised me there—that first really happy day of all my boyhood.

I was standing in my old attitude, looking along the valley to where the great gray house caught all the sunshine; and in a moody, tired way, I was comparing the life within it (framed in wealth and ease and luxury) with my daily existence here at the farm, where Uncle Joshua and I worked against a gloomy background of silence and labor, and where every day was darkened for me by my own consciousness of ignorance. I had been that morning chafing more than ever against the life I led, and wondering if the lads I knew, who had mothers and sisters, could ever feel as I

did ; when suddenly she came up across the meadow to that very gate where I leaned in my discontent, and my eyes were so fixed upon the house of which I loved to dream, that I never heard or saw her till she was close upon me. Then——

But never since—not even in the evening, before that very day was dead—could I recall it all exactly as it must have happened—this first step of mine into a new life where that unacknowledged weight of ignorance and self-mistrust were to be taken from me. †

She had come across the meadows, she said, fancying that, by trespassing a little, she could strike into the park eventually by a new way. And I—my cheeks flushing like a girl's while she spoke to me—opened the orchard gate, and asked her, with my hat in my hand, if I might go with her, because, along the nearest way of all, there were palings to climb.

She smiled a little as she looked down

upon the farmer lad ; and I, too proud of winning that smile to care what could have called it forth, stood waiting for her permission to guide her—waiting very anxiously, as she could surely see. For a moment she hesitated, looked around, as if she wished that she could find her way alone ; then, with another glance into my face, she seemed suddenly and quite willingly to make up her mind.

“If you can spare the time,” she said, with that smile which for years from that day was to be to me the most beautiful thing the world contained, “I would like you to come. We need not hurry, and you shall take me—*not* the very nearest way of all where there are palings to climb.”

I don't know how it happened. It was by some kind and clever way of her own, and in her gentle sympathy, that she found out how the young farm lad, who walked so shyly beside her, was longing for something that should make life more to him than a

mechanical and spiritless round of toil—a soulless round. I never said so to her, Heaven knows, but I felt it so, many and many a time—a soulless round, only of hunger earned and hunger satisfied.

And when she had learned of this want, she was not vexed, but even led me on to talk, until the reticent, old-fashioned lad had let her see the longing which he himself did not even comprehend.

And—I cannot tell what she said in that first bright hour of my life, but from that day she taught me herself, and her great kindness and her sympathy satisfied the craving that I never before had understood. And when she knew of those vague, unreal castles the solitary-natured had loved to build, she never laughed nor rebuked him, but gave him deeper thoughts for their foundation, and led him on, by slow, firm steps, to choose and hold the highest and the best of all.

How differently the days sped for me

now! Though my hours of labor on the farm were not shortened, yet they were all different, brightened by the memory of her past lessons, lightened by the anticipation of the next, gilded by one certain lesson she had taught me from the first, wider and brighter and higher than all the others.

I never questioned with myself why she could take this trouble with me, because I instinctively knew then (as I know now) that it was her nature to be kind and brave and helpful to all.

I was constantly now supplied with books, chosen for me by Miss Mary herself (the squire's daughter was always called Miss Mary among us, I suppose because there had been an elder sister who died), and in these I reveled to my heart's content. All the more eagerly—ah, and so much the more happily! I studied them, because I knew Miss Mary would talk of them with me afterward, and so soften both my thoughts and judgments with the bright thoughts

and gentle judgments of her woman-nature. Patiently and pleasantly always she brought her knowledge to the level of my understanding, and so somehow I never felt awkward or ignorant with her.

For two whole years I had led this new and happy life, broken only by Miss Mary's absences from the Hall, when one day she told me, in the light way she always mentioned her own great kindness, that I had gone so far beyond my teacher that she should lose all the credit unless she got help, and therefore that she had won our curate's consent for me to read with him every night for an hour.

At first—grateful as I was to Miss Mary for this kind thought—my heart fell, because I thought it would be so different when I could not feel that the books I read so hungrily had been chosen for me by Miss Mary herself; but I soon found that she was still helping me, though she had so thoughtfully won me a step she could not

give. Long afterward I knew that she had paid our curate generously for those lessons for me, but I did not guess of that then. I suppose I believed that to him, as to me, it would be pleasure enough to do *anything* at Miss Mary's bidding.

It was just one year afterward that a rumor reached us at the farm (no news or rumors reached Uncle Joshua and me until they were old elsewhere) that at Christmas time Miss Mary would be married to Major Western, a gentleman who was very often staying at the Hall. The news at first came like a blow to me; then I discredited it, for Major Western, handsome as he was, never seemed to me to be near enough to Miss Mary for this thought to come to me. But afterward I knew how blind I had been, for now I seemed to see a hundred proofs of Miss Mary's love for him; and though of course I—a lad of fifteen—could not understand this love, never having witnessed it before, it had a strange effect

upon me, especially, perhaps, as I never could like Major Western. Though he always spoke to me even as if he took an interest in me, when he and I were in Miss Mary's presence together, I knew he did it only to win her favor; and I missed the sympathy which she herself had unconsciously taught me to distinguish.

He had left the army, and was reported to be very rich; yet there was a report, too, that the squire did not willingly give his consent to Miss Mary's marriage. But I only wondered, was there any one in the world to whom the squire could willingly give his only child?

So time went on, and now the sight of Major Western's appropriation of Miss Mary, and her thoughtful love for him—the love always trustful, always unsuspecting—hurt me in a strange, acute way; while I let my old selfishness creep around me once again, and even went back to my moody dreaming, picturing her happiness among

her guests at the Hall, while I felt as isolated in the lonely farm as if the sea had rolled between the houses.

Yet, on the very day before her marriage, Miss Mary rode down to the farm, without any of her guests and friends—without even Major Western—just to bid me good-by. It ought to have brightened my own heavy eyes to see how bright hers were; yet I knew I met her with such a worn and gloomy face that I quite well understood what she meant when she laid her gentle hand upon my shoulder and bade me leave off studying late at night.

“I shall never care to study now, Miss Mary,” I said, not even able to look up into her face, as I stood beside her horse.

“Remember, John,” she said, putting aside her own happy thoughts, as she walked with me to the house, “what pleasure, in the years to come, this study will prepare for you. And what a noble life yours

may be, if you are still earnest in your efforts to make it so !”

She stayed with me a long time that morning, in spite of all the guests and gayety at the Hall ; and I think even to this day I remember all she said, and can, in fancy, see her sitting there in the old deep window-seat, with the winter sunshine on her hair, talking to me of our lessons together, of the books we had read, and then—ah, so earnestly and with such trust in me—of what she felt my life would be.

I thank God that I dare recall every one of her dear words !

“ Miss Mary,” I said, when we had gone out to the gate again, and I was looking wistfully over to the woods that hid the Hall, while, before she mounted, she held my hand in hers, “ if in the years to come my life can bring a blessing into any other lives—as you said—it will be only because you yourself have brought a blessing into it.

For everything you have been to me I—I *would* thank you if I could."

"You have," she said, looking at me kindly before she dropped my hand.

Then I tried to bear it all a little better, as I should—I whose life could have no further union with hers.

"I will leave your books at the Hall this evening, Miss Mary," I said, stooping to assist her to mount. "I will never forget all they have taught me: they, with your long, long patient help."

"Keep the books, John, please; keep them all," she said, smiling down upon me from her saddle. "While I am away, I shall be glad to feel that you have them to remind you of your old studies—and of me."

I did not tell her how little I should ever need anything to remind me of her; it was not one of those thoughts that will form themselves into words; and, oh, how ashamed I was afterward whenever I recalled this! my answer to her last good-by

was broken by a tearless, passionate sob. So, though I tried so hard to watch her to the last as she rode down the narrow lane, I could not see her, for the mist before my stupid eyes.

Yet it was something to hear her horse stepping so slowly along the frosty ground, for I fancied I could *hear* that she was thinking of the desolate lad she had left behind, and whose heart she had taken.

For many and many a day after that my books were dull and toneless, and my work so wearisome that even Uncle Joshua was roused to wonder, and to bid me "walk more and go to bed at earlier hours."

CHAPTER II.

WRECKED.

Year after year passed without bringing the squire's daughter back to her old home. Perhaps the squire sometimes met her in London; but even this I doubted, when I saw how the brave old face grew anxious and troubled, and the tall form bent and listless, through those three solitary years. How could I ever doubt, seeing that each month brought a change in him, those painful rumors which sometimes reached us of the life that Major Western led abroad, and of the constant demands made upon the squire by his daughter's husband. We all saw how they told upon him in his solitude at the Hall, and how, after every absence,

he came back more bowed and worn, more hasty and impatient, less like the cheery, gentle squire whose home life had been so happy in the old days.

He never now strolled down to the farm for a few minute's chat with Uncle Joshua, or to laugh with him over the old joke of my uncle's fabulous savings—as he used. He never now stopped me when he met me, to speak a few kind words to the lad to whom his daughter had been so kind.

Life seemed all changed for the kindly, brave old man, and, though we did not know of it at the time, the steady, gradual drain upon the estate, and the disgrace he felt it for himself as well as for his daughter, to be allied to a professional gambler, were a weight he could neither shake off nor bear. And so, by the end of those three short years, he laid it down in utter weariness, and with it the active, simple, blameless life.

It was only then, when her father lay

dead, that Major Western brought his wife back to her old home once again. But they stayed only until the funeral was over; and I do not think that in any way Major Western cared to consult either the feelings or wishes of any of the late squire's friends or tenants, though we were all there, paying our last respect to one we had always loved as well as honored.

Yet on the sad day she sat out on that swift journey back, Mrs. Western came to the old farm to bid me good-by, and, in her own arms, brought her little baby girl. How sadly I contrasted then—with the bright face of my young teacher three years before—this pale, pathetic face of the young mother, who seemed to have lost even all memory of that radiant smile I used to think the brightest thing on earth; except that its shadow dawned upon her grave, sad face just once—just for the moment while her baby lay contentedly in my careful, awkward arms.

Soon after Major Western had taken his wife back to his old life in Paris, my Uncle Joshua died ; and I felt myself lonelier than ever at the old farm, though it grew and improved rapidly now, for my uncle had left me the accumulated savings of his whole lifetime, and I found that the squire's jest had had truth beneath it too.

After that first and last visit of Major Western and his wife, the old hall was closed for quite three months. Then one day my eyes fell on an advertisement, inserted by Mr. Needham, the family lawyer, offering the Hall for sale, and of course we knew by whose orders this had been done. Not long afterward it seemed somehow to be understood among us—though I never knew who was first answerable for the news—that it was to be let, the sale having been satisfactorily effected, but the purchaser having no intention of living there. Some said this purchaser was Mr. Needham himself ; others that an eccentric young mer-

chant had bought the house to retire to when he had made sufficient fortune to enjoy it and had worked sufficiently to need rest. But no one asserted anything as quite certain, and so rumors reached me only in a vague surmising way.

So the years went on, until ten had passed since the day Miss Mary had bidden me good-by at the farm, on the clear winter morning before her marriage. Never through all that time had I entertained a thought of marriage, and somehow my solitary nature and solitary habits, increased so greatly by my solitary life, seemed to save me from those jests and reports of marriage so usual, I think among young people in a quiet country life. Ah, but I never *was* a young man ; never until——

I knew why no thought of marriage had come to me as it comes to most men. Years ago—unconsciously perhaps—I had enshrined an ideal in my heart, so perfect, so all-sufficing even in its dreamy unreality,

that my heart cried for no lesser. Yet even so—thanks always to her teaching!—my life was not an isolated nor quite a useless one.

The Hall was occupied now by a widow lady with her son and daughter, Mr. Fortescue renting it from the absent proprietor. Young Mr. Fortescue was at Eton, but of course at home a good deal. He was a handsome, rather sociable young fellow, whom we soon grew to like; his sister had still her foreign governess, but she looked almost grown up even then, a peculiarity which always struck me even more than her very stylish appearance, and rather haughty and ungracious manners. But sometimes I pulled myself up sharply in my judgment of her, remembering that I might be unfair, because it was so all impossible to me patiently to see any other young lady take the place Miss Mary used to fill.

Still, the tenants were, I believe, pretty well contented now with “the family” at

the Hall. And though they were not the old squire and Miss Mary, and though it was spitefully whispered that the late Mr. Fortescue had been a Glasgow tradesman, young Mr. Fortescue had such a pleasant way with him, and seemed so anxious to belong to the place, as a country gentleman should, that at last we grew to speak of him quite naturally as "the young squire."

So ten years went by, as I said, and for seven of that we had neither seen nor heard of Major and Mrs. Western, when one day Mr. Needham sent me a French newspaper with one paragraph marked round with red ink. It was rather hard work to me to translate this French, because it seemed different from the French I had mastered in Miss Mary's books, but gradually the meaning lay clear and plain before me—the cruel meaning of it all.

I read the paragraph again, slowly through from beginning to end, yet all the while I followed the words my eyes seemed only to

see the young mother who, seven years before, had smiled with such a sweet, pathetic smile when her baby's arms went softly round my neck at the farm gate.

The French paragraph told but little, as I knew afterward, of the long course of selfish indulgence, of reckless extravagance, of systematic gambling, and professional fraud. But it told at length—and with cruel elaboration in every detail—how the career of dissipation had been cut short by the hand of the self-murderer.

That night I had a vivid and most painful dream. In this dream I knew myself to be in a strange country, without knowing what country it was ; and, though the scene around me was unfamiliar, I knew exactly how and where to go, and went on alone, unquestioning and unquestioned, until I found myself before a closed door. Then it seemed as if I paused, seeking courage to pass beyond ; and I can feel, even now as I write, so many long years afterward, the

sort of self-pity with which I saw my fingers trembling upon the handle of the door.

The room I entered in this dream of mine was barely furnished and half-darkened ; but to me, standing within the door unseen, it was its one solitary occupant which made the whole picture so sad and so pathetic. White and worn and feeble, like a shadow of her old self, Miss Mary sat there in the utter solitude of deep thought, the eyes that used to be so beautiful, hollow and weary now, as they were fixed upon the empty grate. Presently, while still I watched her in silence, with my hand pressed upon my heart, I saw her rise, as if in sudden determination, and, opening a desk upon the table, begin to write.

Conscious in some way of my own invisibility to her, I came up to her side and read as she wrote ; for I seemed to know this was a letter to myself. Ah, what sad and pleading words they were ! And yet I could not understand what was the *some-*

thing which she sought of me. I read every word again, as Miss Mary leaned her head upon her hand and rested; but no—the vague, pitiful words, so humble, so pleading, bore no distinct meaning to me, except that *one* prayer came from her heart on this sad day, and that she felt that I could satisfy it.

It did not seem strange to me, in my dream, that, while I could so easily read every word she wrote, I could not grasp the real meaning of her letter.

When it was finished, the heavy eyes of the writer followed it slowly, line by line, word by word, while her tears fell heavily upon it. Then there was a long pause, while she held the letter in her hands, closely and tightly; and there grew a restless, feverish pain upon the young, wan face. Then the silence was broken by a sob—ah, such a passionate, breathless sob!—Miss Mary rose, put the letter into the empty grate, and set light to it, turning away with

her eyes covered, while it burned to ashes.

So wonderfully real this dream was to me even next morning that it seemed all one with the resolution I had made to go at once to Paris. Miss Mary wished for me and needed me—that was quite clear to me; and I did not pause to question with myself whether this consciousness ought to move me, based only on a dream. I felt no anxiety about leaving the farm, for I had a clever bailiff now. I did not dread the journey, though I had never before been beyond the neighboring counties. All was lost in my engrossing anxiety to reach Paris. I did so next morning; then, driving rapidly, and sparing no labor of inquiry, I reached, within an hour, the house where Major Western lay dead. But his wife was not there. She had not lived with him (so the woman who kept the house where he had died, and where at first they had lived together, told me in answer to my quiet, earnest questioning) since she had, by a

trial in which he was concerned, discovered how his wealth was gained. Mrs. Western had never known, unfortunately, so the woman said, until her own property was all squandered.

Since then she had lodged elsewhere with her little daughter, and had earned, it was said, by giving lessons, a livelihood for herself and her child. But lately—so the woman had gathered from casual remarks of Major Western's servant—Mrs. Western had been too ill to leave her room. She used to live here with her husband, when in Paris—so the women went on, detaining me against my will—and she was pretty then, and bright and generous; but that was a long time ago, and she had begun to change and pine almost directly.

Her doctor had been in about Major Western's funeral, but she herself was far too ill to come, even if she would have forgiven the past, and done so.

It was a pitiful story of a husband's sin

and a wife's fruitless sorrow, and I was very glad when it was over and I was on my way again. I had only been able to discover the street in which Mrs. Western lived, and so I took each house as I reached it, determining not to miss one chance, as time was so precious to me.

And at last I found the right house, and was taken softly to the door of the quiet, shadowed room unseen, where she lay. For a minute I stood just within, almost as I had stood in my dream; but the whole scene was different, and I seemed to forget my dream just then. I only saw the sad, sad scene before me.

The young mother lay breathing faintly and rapidly, her head raised upon the small pillows which a little girl had propped as high as she could, and was supporting against her own tiny form, as she knelt behind her mother on the bed, watching her face wistfully the while, and softly stroking one thin white hand. Ah, such an anxious, troubled

look it was for the face of so young a child ! And there was almost a woman's grave and tender care in the soothing, quiet action—such patient strength, too, in the unmoved, steady posture.

But when I looked into the mother's eyes, that mist came once again before my own which had blotted out that face once before, when it had been my teacher's.

She tried hard to speak to me, but the weakness was too great in that dying hour, and I—how could I help her in this terrible suffering of my own ? And so the precious minutes passed. But I had lifted the child from her cramped position, and I myself supported the weak form which I had last seen so young and beautiful and full of life.

But the little one, though released, crept to her mother's side, and, with a tenderness quaintly protecting, and without a word, slipped one arm round her mother.

Above the little face, so like her own,

Mrs. Western's yearning eyes sought mine; and at that moment I sounded the very depths of her speechless anxiety for her child. The question she would not write to me, the question she could not speak, I read now in that slow, sad gaze—so pitiful, so humble! I put my arms about the tiny slender figure of her child, and drew it to me—drew it even from the mother's side—while a new look dawned upon the beautiful dying face, a look even painful in its speechless gratitude.

Falling upon my knees beside the bed and laying one hand upon the child's head and the other upon the mother's hand, I promised I would love and cherish the little one always—always.

Ah, the mother knew how solemnly this vow of mine came from my grateful, sorrowful heart! She could hear its truth and earnestness, there on the border-land where *all* is true. She could see now all that she had been to me so long, and all that I, in

humble gratitude, would be to her little one.

She saw—ah, who, who can tell how much she saw in that clear light so near the end? But a wonderful smile lit up the dying eyes, and made them beautiful and glad.

CHAPTER III.

A CHILD NO MORE.

We lived a life of quiet happiness at the old farm, the child and I. Gradually there died from my mind the haunting fear that she would fret and pine in the dull house, with no little playfellow, no child-friend, no companion save a man who had been all his life used to solitude and silence. Such fear of mine, though a natural one, could not live in her presence; for, though there were times when, coming unexpectedly upon her in the twilight, I found her eyes full of tears, and though sometimes in church, as we knelt together, I heard a little catching in her breath, as if a babyish sob had to be stifled, I knew this was nat-

ural to the little motherless child. And she had always a smile to greet me with, and a bright answer for every one of my endless, anxious questions. So, as I said, quite soon there died entirely that great fear that she could never live without a child-friend or a mother's care.

She was never shy with me, even from the very first. Once, when I spoke of this long afterward, she said could that have been possible, after she had seen the smile of perfect trust and contentment her mother had given me, when I had taken her first into my care?

How proud I was of my fairy-child! Was she ever one hour out of my thoughts through all the livelong day? I had some one to care for now; I had some one to work for, some one to share the solitary old home now; and for her sake, it must be bright and pretty. I grew a very child myself in seeking a child's amusement; I felt almost young myself in my intense desire to

understand the young ; and at last I grew almost wise in choosing what would be the best and brightest and pleasantest for my little one. How I remember with what care I chose the girl who was to attend upon little May (her name was Mary, like her Mother's, but she told me she never remembered being called anything but May ; and I was very glad ; for the mother's name seemed sacred to me still), and how the housekeeper used to smile sometimes at the elaborate, careful orders of the master who used to be so utterly indifferent to little household matters ! But there were times, for all this new-found interest of mind, when I used to watch the pretty little figure moving softly in the dark old rooms, and sorely and regretfully allow that, however anxious I might be over the task I had no right to take upon myself the guidance of a little creature such as this. Care, of course, I might bestow upon her—care and love untold ; but, for guidance and teaching——

Why, she would be a woman some day, and have to go from this quiet farm to act a woman's part in that wide unknown world whose sunshine only such natures as hers could make. And could she go with only such guidance and teaching as I could give her?

At last all the doubts and fears resolved themselves into one momentous question, which was before me ever, night and day—how was my little one to be educated? She seemed to be growing taller every day, and must she not now need wise and womanly teachings?

If so, she must have it, even if the old farm is left to me desolate again.

“I wonder——”

“What are you wondering? I think you are always wondering now, John.”

I had taught her from the first to call me so. How could I resist the temptation, when there was no one else in all the world to call me by my Christian name, and when

it was so doubly sweet to me from those small lips which had been the first within my memory to cling to mine?

She was sitting now in her favorite position on my knee, her tiny fingers stroking away the lines in my face.

"I was wondering about your education, dear."

"You have wondered about that before," the child said, folding her hands. "Will you settle it now, please, John? Then you needn't wonder again."

"Then you must help me, dear," I said, without a smile for her little comical attack of gravity.

"Yes—of course. How were *you* educated, John? Who taught you?"

This was a little respite—that was all; so I enjoyed it.

"Your mother first; then our curate; then myself."

"I see," said May, laying her cheek softly against mine, as she almost always did at

my mention of her mother. "Then I will have the same teachers exactly. First my mother (of course it was); then our curate—if you like; then you. That's all settled, isn't it, John? Will the curate be the same who taught you?"

"Hardly, dear, seeing he is a rector now and living hundreds of miles away from here. Your teacher must be the new curate who comes next week, if we decide upon that."

"Oh, we *have* decided it!" said May, again folding her hands demurely. "I must be taught exactly the same as you were, John. Then we shall be just as clever as each other."

Original and questionable as the idea was, I still felt it a great relief that my darling had not chosen to go away from me, or even asked for a lady teacher at home.

So it was all settled, as she said (everything at the farm now was always *as she*

said'); and on the next Sunday, when our new young curate read himself in, I could plainly see that May was most gravely studying him as her future preceptor. I can remember, even now, how the sun-rays touched my child's bright hair that morning, while she sat so still in the corner of our big pew, with her hands folded, as she had a trick of folding them, and her questioning, earnest eyes upon the young preacher's face. And yet, though it was some one else whose words she followed, some one else who had interested her, I think I had never before felt her quite so near to me, quite so entirely my own. But then that morning she was but a little child, and her world contained so few besides myself.

Cast thy bread upon the waters, for thou shalt find it after many days.

I loved that text which the young man had chosen, and every word of his sermon sank into my heart; while the one vague

worldless hope it gave me only my Father in heaven knew.

"John," said my child, walking on her homeward way beside me, both her arms locked round my arm, "that verse was one that mother loved. She would have liked all Mr. Leslie said. Did you?"

"Yes, dear."

"Mother told me often exactly what it means," said May, in her childish gravity, and with that touch of sadness in her voice that told the story of her infancy, and which I feared she would never lose. "Ever such a crumb would do, she said, if we are poor and haven't more; and still there will come back a great, great deal. You think so, too, don't you, John?"

Ah, the wide, vague thoughts which my little one, with all her pondering, could not touch! Patience for the "many days," whether they tell a lifetime or only a portion of it, and, through them all, God's will be done!

A few days afterward Mr. Leslie began his new duties as May's teacher, and I think that he very often found them rather hard ; for, in spite of her fitful gravity, lessons seemed to her very unnecessary interruptions to her day's enjoyment ; and, in spite of this being her own proposal, she soon let it be very evident to him that she declined to recognize any authority save mine. "What more natural," I said to myself, with a sigh, "than that she should obey her staid, unyouthful guardian?"

Yet Leslie enjoyed his task too. I saw that, almost from the first ; and, as the years went on, he grew to enjoy it more and more, until I felt quite sure that, above the tasks of all his week days, this task of teaching May was pleasant and delightful to him, and that from his being teacher, it had come to pass that he himself was being taught.

CHAPTER IV.

THE UNDERCURRENT.

It came upon me unawares—one lovely morning when the summer world around me looked just as it did upon that morning when Miss Mary found out first the craving of my lonely boyhood. The noise of the rooks in the old avenue (mellowed and familiar though it was) had given May one of her transparent excuses for putting away her Schiller, and telling Leslie that, as she could not hear his corrections, it would be safer for her to give up reading for that day. She rarely let any excuse escape her to be out-of-doors on these summer mornings, even when Mr. Fortescue did not come strolling to the farm, to loiter there,

as he so often did, for an unwarrantable and unconscionable time. And so, of course, I was not surprised when she came dancing out to me, with a low exultant laugh over Leslie's defeat, and a glad greeting for the young squire, who stood beside me, rather tired of having so long pretended not to be watching for her coming.

It had not come upon me yet; but that morning my eyes were to open suddenly to the consciousness that my little ward was a woman. I had not fully grasped the knowledge yet, but later on that morning it was to be given me beyond my power of losing it again. Going about the house and farm with me—always with me just as she did when a tiny child—with the same snatches of old songs, and the same coaxing words upon her lips, and the smile and sunshine in her eyes, how should I guess that others saw a change in my darling, until it was shown to me so plainly?

We had all been chatting together on the

one old twisted seat upon the lawn, when May ran into the fruit garden to gather us some strawberries, and Mr. Fortescue, of course went with her. I had the *Standard* in my hand, and had been reading now and then aloud to them, especially enjoying May's quaint remarks; while, in the intervals, the three young people talked. But now I put my newspaper down upon the seat, as Leslie was left with me, and began to talk with him, wondering a little though in that first moment, why he had not as usual, followed May.

I soon understood why, and I soon saw I need not trouble myself for subjects to carry on conversation. For, with scarcely any hesitation, with only a restless movement of his fingers and a flush upon his face, showing how he felt the words, he asked me for permission to woo my child.

Thus it was that on that summer morning it came upon me unawares that my darling was a woman. Leslie's was a long

story, I think; so I had time for other thoughts—beside one mad and selfish one—before I saw him looking at me, waiting eagerly and hopefully for my answer. My child was a woman now, to be wooed and won, to choose another home, and to be its mistress in a sweeter, dearer way than she could be mistress here at the old farm, which, without her——

No; thought would go no further in its sudden weakness. My darling was a woman. That was all I had heard and understood, in Leslie's words. Ah, how cruel-sounding they had been, in spite of their ringing burden of manly, tender love! My dear was old enough to leave me now. It was natural for her to govern and gladden another home, and she had no further need of me. Her husband would be her guardian now. Surely the change had all come suddenly, upon this summer morning, as a storm breaks sometimes in a brilliant sky. Surely it could not be that such a loneli-

ness as this had been gradually and imperceptibly closing round me, ever since that day when, with her warm, soft arms so tight around my neck, I brought her first into the old farm, and made it for the first time feel like home.

“I’m afraid I seem impatient in repeating the question, Mr. Fearne: but your consent would give me such hope and courage.”

Repeating the question! What question had Leslie repeated, unheard by me? Had he told me anything, except that my darling was ready to leave me? Was not that enough to tell me on one day? If he had more to say, would it not do to tell me, presently, when I had grown a little accustomed to this new thought?

“If you will only give your consent to my paying my addresses to Miss Western——”

I picked up the *Standard* and opened it, and folded it on my knee in a deliberate, leisurely way; but all the time my pulses

throbbed as even Leslie could never have felt his do, through all that history he had given me of his love. And my lonely heart beat as if it had not learned, years and years before, what utter loneliness meant.

"I give you my consent. Why should I withhold it?"

"Thank you, thank you, a thousand times! And you wish me success in my suit?"

Wish him success, when his success meant a desolate home and future for myself! No; my dry, unsteady lips would not have formed the words, even if my heart could have felt them.

"Plead your own cause, Leslie," I said, rising in utter weariness, and still in the great bewilderment and pain of my new awakening. "Could you ever doubt my earnest wishes for my child's happiness?"

"John!" cried my darling, that moment running up to me, while I went toward the house, feeling strangely bent and spiritless,

as I walked slowly in the mocking sunshine. "I have left Mr. Fortescue to finish gathering the strawberries. He has promised not to give up till the basket is full; and you and I are going to the dairy now for the cream. Mr. Leslie"—she beckoned to the curate over my shoulder, as we stood together—"please fetch the sugar, and then we shall be all ready."

"My dear," I whispered, "hadn't you better go with one of them?"

"I think not," May answered, in that ponderous way of hers which was so quaintly characteristic of her, and so irresistibly pretty on her bright young face. "I think I can trust either of *them* alone."

"And not me?" I questioned; but I drew my hand back, as it went so naturally around her in its old caressing way.

"Trust you alone, John," she queried, with raised eyebrows and puckered lips; "and in the dairy, too? Oh, no!"

"Well," I said, as we walked on, she

with her fingers locked about my arm, just as we had walked together so many hundreds of times before—ah, so exactly like it had been from her babyhood, that now I might have thought the old times unchanged but for the haunting memory of what Leslie had shown me!—"well, and what did the young squire think of your leaving him your work to do, May?"

"He won't find it any harder. He was working for both of us before. I only stood by and directed him!"

"And did he like that?"

"He said so."

"And he asked you to stay, I suppose?"

I was questioning her, only because I dreaded my own silence and my own thoughts—just yet.

"Yes; he asked me to stay, of course. Indeed, I'm not quite sure whether he hadn't tears in his eyes. Don't you think it probable, John?"

"Very probable."

"No wonder you look skeptical on such a subject," my darling said, looking up into my face with a pretty pout, but as I knew, with a questioning gravity in her eyes. "You never could appreciate the value Mr. Fortescue sets upon me. He thinks me far more beautiful than the Queen of Sheba was when she came to dazzle Solomon, and far wiser than she was when she went away with all his lessons fresh on her mind. He says so, John, indeed; though you look as if I had invented it."

"Disputed authorship," I muttered, just as carelessly as I could; but my eyes were opening more and more, and my heart was sinking in spite of all the efforts I made to be glad—for my child's sake. The squire, too, had found out what I had been too blind to notice! He, too, knew that my pet was a woman, to be wooed with flattery. He, too, was weaning her from me, loving her himself and longing for her

He, too, had learned the power of her beauty, the charm of her winning ways, and the wealth of her noble woman-nature. He, too, felt it was time she left this quiet home of mine, and had another home suited to her youth and beauty and gayety. And he had the wealth and luxuries to give her. Was it not time, indeed, that she left my covetous embrace, and this home whose only beauty and only sunshine were of her own giving?

CHAPTER V.

WHERE THE ROCK AND RIVER MEET.

That night I sat in the sad summer twilight, and watched my darling, as if I had been away from her for years. Had it not been as if I had, while she had grown from childhood to womanhood unperceived by me? And I saw the change; for, though it was the child-face still, in its sunny purity and innocence, that look of thoughtfulness and almost of care that I sometimes saw there, and had always fancied was the never extinguished trace of the old sorrow of her childhood, might be the thoughtfulness of a woman, perhaps.

No; it was only to me that my darling was still a child. To others——

But how could I judge her as others would? How could I bear to look, even for one moment, as a stranger would upon the girlish face and form guarded so sacredly in my heart? I tried, in this vain wish of mine, to see my child as others saw her, to compare her with other ladies I had seen; but who was there in our little world who ought to be compared with her? I said, my eyes resting happily upon the quiet figure standing near me in the twilight.

With all her riches and her high education, what was the young lady at the Hall beside Miss Mary's child—who had been nurtured only in the grim old farm, and educated so differently? "It is her birth asserting itself," I thought, grateful that this humble life, to which I had brought her, could not efface that. "Though Miss Fortescue has the home and wealth which should have been May's, she can never have her beauty and her grace."

But another thought followed soon, as I

recalled the lessons this long day had taught me. Even the home and the wealth too may come back to Miss Mary's child ; for was not the young squire as deeply in earnest as the curate ? And would it not be a proud day for him if he could take my pretty child as mistress to the home that had belonged to her forefathers for four hundred years ?

“ What is it, John ? ”

My darling—wondering, perhaps, at my long silence—had come softly up to me in the fading light, and stood opposite, looking down upon me with her wistful smile.

“ Has Mr. Leslie been complaining of me again, John ? Please, I should like to leave off my reading lessons now. I —— ”

“ You what, dear ? ”

“ I know as much as he does. ”

I could see that she expected a reproof or a jest, but, in my newly acquired knowledge, I seemed to understand too much from that broken, half-defiant speech. Les-

lie's love was no longer a secret from her.

"Leslie is a very good teacher, May," I said, scarcely knowing what to say, only glad at heart, I remember, that she knew of his love, and so could not learn it from any words and looks of mine. "I know no one who manages my little rebel better, or better deserves her respect. For, my dear——"

"*My dear*," mimicked May, screwing up her lips, as she bent her sweet face close to mine, and put her hands upon my shoulder, "*my dear*, his lessons have grown very tiresome to me lately, and so I want to leave them off."

In spite of her gay mimicry, a look almost of pain had stolen into her eyes. I felt that the few words were unusually earnest words, and somehow I knew instinctively that I had better leave Leslie's cause in his own hands. I had given him permission to plead it when he would. But could I help wishing that, when my child should

leave me, it would be to go back to her mother's home? Would she not soon be told by the young squire that this was the wish of his heart?

Next day Mr. Leslie heard gently from his old pupil that he could never be more to her than a dear friend—almost an elder brother, she said, with the tears filling her eyes, because she saw how little he had expected this reply, and how deeply he felt her quiet, sad refusal of his love?

CHAPTER VI.

FOR HER SAKE.

From that very day—with a strange persistency which grew out of my fear lest she should see what real pain the subject always gave me, because of the selfishness I could not overcome—I tried to get into the habit of talking to May of Ernest Fortescue's hope, as if it were as pleasant a thought to me as it must be to her.

Mrs. Fortescue had now been dead about two years, and the young squire was five-and-twenty. So I felt how little reason he would have for any delay in winning the girl he loved for his wife. So, as I say, I gradually slipped into the way of talking to May about her future in the old home, and

never did I let her guess of any pain the subject gave me; while she received it every day differently, in a childish, willful way, which I quite well understood, though she fancied that it skillfully hid from me all deeper and truer feeling.

When we would pass the old Hall, in our walks or rides together, I tried to speak of it as of a home from which she was only temporarily absent; and if all this was done in selfishness—that I might prepare *myself*, and be saved from a great shock at last—she never guessed it was so. I used again and again to tell her how her mother had loved this beautiful old house, and show her favorite spots in the park and gardens. Then I would wonder, in quite an easy way, whether those nooks would be the favorites too of her mother's child. Sometimes, in that quaint, grave way of hers, May would discuss these fancies thoughtfully, as if they related only to some one in whom we took a mutual interest. Some-

times she would stop me in a sudden, dignified way that was almost comic. Sometimes she would silence me pettishly and impatiently, blushing the while in a strange, nervous way that I understood—I was growing quick now to understand such signs.

I remember well the day on which I first felt able—without betraying anything that it would have distressed my child to see—to speak to her seriously about her future. It was in the summer twilight, and I remember how still the roses were around the open window, and how richly and daintily the scent of jasmine filled the quiet room. May had been singing to me in the fading light choosing, of course, just those songs she could remember without music or light,—and the last she had sung had touched me strangely and inexplicably. It was not a new song either. I had heard her sing it many times before, and had even joined in it sometimes—improvising a bass, as May

used to delight in my doing, all through those happy days before I knew that she was a child no more—but on that evening it seemed to have a new, sad, reproachful meaning for me. And so I gently and gratefully took its lesson to my heart; before my child left the piano, and came back to her old place on the quaint low chair I had chosen for her so long ago, and which always stood beside mine.

“May,” I said then, without touching the pretty, bright hair, which it had been a silly habit of mine to stroke as she sat beside me thus in this quiet twilight hour, “that was a good little girl in your song; but I don’t, all the same, think she was quite justified in disappointing her lover for the sake of her parents. Of course,” I went on, (I hope just in my old straightforward way), “it is very pretty in a song for her to think of those who will miss her when she goes to her husband’s house, and for their sakes to bid him bide a wee. But in real life, my

pet, *his* claim should have come first, however truly and sadly she should say :

‘ And weel I ken they’d missed me, lad,
Gin I come hame nae mair.’ ”

“ I don’t think,” May said, slowly folding her hands on the arm of my chair, “ that she could have done otherwise. In some cases it might have been different ; but don’t you remember :

‘ They gave no thought to self at all,
They did but think of me.’ ”


“ May,” I said, wondering a little over the great earnestness in her lifted face, and bringing in my answer rather hurriedly and even irrelevantly, “ I have often feared that you did not think seriously enough over Mr. Leslie’s proposal to you. I wish I had been able myself to warn you what was coming. But I am a sleeply fellow, and had forgotten that my pet had grown into a woman. Now I know it, and can caution her sagely, bidding her remember that, however pretty she may be, and however worth the winning, she has no right to go

on winning the love of good men, and never accepting it. There, dear, you must imagine me the 'old folk,' putting to you my view of the question—bungling over it of course, or it would not be me."

"Bungling—yes," May answered with that slow gravity of her childhood; "or it would not be you, John. And I am not to bungle again, I suppose, as I bungled in refusing Mr. Leslie?"

I could have fancied her jesting, but for that tell-tale blush which rose so slowly and softly in her cheeks, as her thoughts caught and held my meaning.

"Those old folk in the song ought to have had a word or two to say in the matter of their pet leaving them," I said. "It is very hard upon *us* never to get a hearing. Now just suppose I were not allowed to say what I think, before my pet goes to live in her mother's old home, and with one whom her mother would so well have liked."



Again that slow, bright blush spread over the face on which I gazed so anxiously—*only* anxiously, I trust, though my heart beat heavily in its love and longing.

“You liked Mr. Fortescue better than you liked Mr. Leslie,” said May.

“Could Leslie have given my pet such a home as——”

“That is no answer,” May interrupted, with one of her rare flashes of petulance, though still she kept her seat beside me, and I tried not to fear any coming day when the low, pretty chair should stand near me vacant. “You never say you like Ernest Fortescue for his own sake. If—if I ever tell you that I love him, John, it will not be for the sake of his home; it will be for—for himself.”

“Of course it will, my child,” I answered, knowing she would never learn how hard it was for me to say these things, and finding courage at last to lay my hand upon her head; and it shall be a happy

day for—both of us, as well as for him.”

“Suppose the day never comes,” she said, her eyes bright with laughter. “Now that you have settled everything, what shall I do if he never asks me—my opinion on the subject of a future mistress for the Hall?”

Then I laughed indeed, because he had taken such great, unceasing, and frequent pains to make his meaning plain to me, when he came so very often to the farm, and had several times tried to ask me formally for my ward—only, I had, so far, been able, in my cowardice, to put off the evil day.

“I think he *will* consult you, dear,” I said; trying after my usual quiet, practical tones; “and when he does, I shall feel that I give you not only to a pleasant, clever man, but to a gentleman who, being in your own grade of life——”

“*My* grade of life!” May interrupted, tapping her foot impatiently upon the floor. “What does that mean, John? I am a far-

mer's child, and no one whom *you* hold above you is in my grade of life. 'That I was not born in this dear old farm, and that you are not like other farmers, makes no shadow of difference."

There was a little pause, which I could not bear to break, because it was filled so warmly by the memory of that time her words had recalled to me, when first a child's soft hand caressed me, and a child's lips lay upon my own. It was my pet herself who broke the pause at last, lifting her head from the arm of my chair, and looking straight into my eyes, a little defiantly, perhaps, yet rather wistfully too.

"Those wise little bits of advice you give me, John, don't come a bit naturally from your old lips; and when you tell me of those gorgeous visions you see of my future, your eyes don't seem a bit to see anything of the kind. I would not like to hint that you tell fibs, John, but—but—well, I think other subjects are more in your line. Are

you so terribly afraid of having me too long upon your hands?"

"Dear, I am only afraid of keeping my ——" I broke off my speech in haste. It would have been the wildest that I had ever made to her, and never before had my voice shaken as it shook then in its suppressed passion. But I had said too little to betray me, and the gathering darkness hid from her that brief flash of truth upon my face. She should have no pain of mine to bear. And even for me—would it not be harder for me to let her go to her mother's home, if she had guessed of the desolation she would leave in mine.

CHAPTER VII.

TOWARD THE OLD HOME.

“I cannot be surprised,” poor Leslie had said to me, humbly and dejectedly, when he told me of May’s refusal, “when I have such a rival as Mr. Fortescue. Independently of his really good qualities and personal attractions, it must, of course, be a great temptation to May to go and reign in the beautiful old home of her grandfathers.”

I had said it would be well and natural for it to be so; and I thought it too; for what other home was worthy of my darling? And to whom could I ever give her so willingly as to the handsome, courtly gentleman who wooed her with such untiring earnestness?

One thing I puzzled over a good deal. Thoroughly as May always enjoyed Mr. Fortescue's society at the farm, she never seemed to care to go to the Hall, though the invitations sent to her were constant and most persuasive. Sometimes they came for both of us, and then May always said she would go. So I tried to like the thought when she said that, and was generally ready to go with her, because she would enjoy it, though I was but dull company for Miss Fortescue when I got there. My thoughts were seldom in the present, for if they were not resting on that past, when Miss Mary had talked to me so kindly and so helpfully to me in the dear old rooms, they were ever trying to touch that future when my pet should call this home, and make it sweet and bright beyond all words—when she should be the cherished wife of a man who was her equal, and who would give her all which I would have loved to lavish upon her, had I had it in my power.

That autumn the squire determined to give the village children a treat in his park. I know how the idea had first occurred to him on one of those days when he found May in the school play-ground, starting the children at their games, as she often did, because our village school-mistress was lame; but no one could blame him if the plan did not originate solely in his desire to give the children pleasure, because he was so energetic and so happy over it, and labored so very indefatigably to impress upon May the fact that he liked village school children for their own sakes alone. One thing I was glad to see: he never teased May for advice, nor made her the recipient of his plans. Perhaps his sister helped him, taking an interest in the feast because there were to be private guests, too; but in any event May and I were only invited exactly as other guests.

I don't think it was cowardice—though I felt sure that before this day was over

young Fortescue would ask my pet that question which I dreaded—that made me wish to stay away from the Hall that day. I think it was only the old shrinking from society, coming back to me with the inevitable return to my old lonely life, which so surely was prepared for me now. So I tried to take it for granted that May would go without me.

“Such things are so little in my way, pet,” I said. “You will go without me this once?”

“No, John.”

There followed no enticing and persuading. She pretended she was as willing to stay at home as I was. And, though for a moment I longed selfishly that she should do so, knowing our happy days together were so nearly over, I could not let her. Should I keep my bird shut in this old cage with me, when her bright voice and face were longed for, and listened so eagerly for, in the wide pleasant world beyond?

"But, May," I argued, "Miss Fortescue needs only young people about her. You will all race and dance and frolic and make yourselves children among children. Of what use shall I be? I would rather stay away. I am more in my place here, darling."

There was silence, perfectly contented, easy silence, while my child hummed a little over the new book she was cutting for me. It was utterly in vain to try to read her face, and I was not quite comfortably certain of her acquiescence, so I came round to the question again, gently :

"You will be sure to enjoy yourself, my pet."

Still silence.

"And I shall be here to receive you, when you come home."

Still no answer, and, though I felt so troubled, I could scarcely help a smile, as, in that quiet, debonair way of hers (spoiled child that she was), she drove me to the question direct.

"You understand that I decide to stay at home, May?"

"Oh, yes!"

"You look forward"—I had come up to her side, and was stroking her hair softly, but I heard the wistfulness even of my own voice, "to enjoying the day, my darling, don't you?"

"Very much, John, I always do enjoy a quiet day at home with you."

I started from her almost guiltily. Had I been tempting her, in my unconscious dread of our coming parting? Had I, too, plainly shown my own solitariness, that she—so bright and merry, and so courted ever among young people—should voluntarily, in her pity for me, forfeit this treat which I knew she would so thoroughly enjoy, and to which her very presence would give such extra pleasure?

"May, this is nonsense," I said, and turned quite away from her; "you must promise me to go."

“Not without you, John.”

And then my darling's arms were round my neck, and her warm eyes were looking into mine—looking into mine, with such intense determination, yet with such laughter that I laughed too. And I don't know where that sullen mood all went, for in another minute I had promised to go to the Hall with May, and had received my kiss of pardon.

So when the day came, we walked together over the fields, just in our own old way, May holding up the skirt of her new dress in a manner which filled me with conflicting feelings, the daintiness of it was so womanlike, her pride in the act so childlike.

“Are you sorry we came, John?” she asked, quite suddenly, as she sat down on the last stile, with certainly no appearance of haste.

Sorry! Was I ever sorry when she was with me?

CHAPTER VIII.

GATHERING SHADOWS.

Quietly and simply dressed as my child was, she shown pre-eminently in her grace and beauty among the guests we found clustered on the lawn, not quite knowing, apparently, whether they ought to venture among the school children, who had already begun to play in earnest among the trees of the park. But for herself May settled the question promptly, in her generous, self-forgetting way; and by ones and twos the fashionable ladies sauntered in her wake; and, some easily, some awkwardly, but none ungraciously, they too joined, as my child did, in the simple, merry games.

Mr. Fortescue hovered at her side, for

his duties as host were not stringent in such a gathering as this ; and presently from following her lead, he grew to seem almost as much at home among the children as my darling did, and certainly, except herself, he did most, and thought most for their pleasure and amusement.

I had great opportunities for noticing everything, for I could not join in all the younger ones did. Yet somehow—I suppose through knowing all the children and their parents, as of course I did, having lived all my life in the village—I had very few idle minutes ; so I noticed how the young squire was always near my child, yet that she never seemed to give him the opportunity of talking to her. Quite merrily always, yet persistently, and probably unnoticed by any one save myself, she evaded any walking or conversing with him apart. Whether it were purposely or unconsciously done I could not be sure, but that it was so I was certain from the first. No sooner was

Mr. Fortescue at her side, as he so often was, with his air of ready appropriation, than she would disappear. But it was only to start a race or help a tiny child in the game; so who could wonder at her swift change of place, when her refusals to dance with the young squire were only that she might be partner to some shy country lad, or pair off two little children and start them in the step? In that quiet observance of her which had grown so natural to me, I saw all this. But I never wondered over it, because I knew that nothing would prevent my darling devoting this day to the children, and never allowing her own pleasure to interfere in any way with theirs.

The afternoon games were over, and the children were having tea upon the lawn—waited on by many pairs of willing, dainty hands, while the Hall servants found their services all anticipated by their master and his guests—when I, standing a little apart to watch the tea, was joined by Miss For-

tescue. I don't understand anything about ladies' dresses, but I remember to this day thinking, as she came toward me, how beautiful my child would look in such a dress, and—how soon it would be in her power to wear it.

“A curious picture,” Miss Fortescue said, pausing beside me, and glancing across the lawn. “I should think, Mr. Fearne, that you never saw such an assembly here before.”

“Twenty years ago,” I answered—quietly and briefly, as I always spoke of those old times to any one save May—“I often saw the children here, and all the villagers.”

“Twenty years ago!” Miss Fortescue repeated, with a polite, forced air of incredulity. “You mean when you were a little boy. Who entertained the poor people here then?”

“Miss Western's mother.”

“Before she married Major Western?”

“Yes, certainly, Miss Fortescue.”

"Mr. Fearne, is it not true that you saw Mrs. Western after her husband's death?"

"Once, yes."

So far I had thought her questions mere idle chat carried on for my benefit, as we both stood apart idly watching the busy scene; but now, glancing down into her face, I saw something there which made my heart beat faster. She was troubled, and had come, of her own will, to me to bring this trouble. With her questions still ringing in my ears, did I not know that this trouble must touch my child? Without stirring a muscle, I yet felt as if I raised a hand to ward it off, as I asked Miss Fortescue some trifling question about the gardens.

"Will you walk round with me?" she said, for all answer to my remark. "I would like to speak with you for a few moments where no one can overhear us."

Like a man in a dream, I offered my arm and led Miss Fortescue down a quiet.

shrubby path on the outskirts of the lawn. For long minutes, that seemed to me to tell an hour, she kept silence: yet though the silence seemed so long, I dreaded even the first word that should break it.

“You say, Mr. Fearne, that you saw May’s mother *after* she lost her husband?”

Miss Fortescue had taken her hand from my arm, and sat down upon an iron seat in the shrubbery, signing to me to seat myself beside her; but I stood opposite, my arms folded, as if I could win strength by my stillness, and my eyes lowered among the dusky leaves, dreading to see upon her face any sorrow that my child might have to bear.

“Yes, I went to Paris the very day after I heard of—after I read the account of Major Western’s su—death.”

“In what paper did you read it? Can you remember?”

“I remember almost every word of the

account, though it was in French. And I have the paper still."

"You have?" she questioned, with a change of tone, and rising a moment to look round in rather a suspicious way. "Then I would like to read it, if you will let me."

"Why, Miss Fortescue?" I asked, really astonished. "Surely such a painful subject had better lie undisturbed, now that time has mercifully burried it."

"If time *had* mercifully burried it," she observed, still with such calm self-possession, yet still with something in her tone that made my pulses throb like a coward's.

"There can be no 'if,'" I said, trying to grasp Miss Fortescue's meaning. The—— death happened nearly nine years ago."

"Mr. Fearne," she had lifted her face to mine, and was looking searchingly at me as she spoke—"the death, as you forbearingly call it, never happened at all. Major Western is living now, and is coming here to claim his daughter."

For a moment the low trees reeled before my eyes, then I remember hasty words of contradiction falling passionately from my lips, while I felt the muscles tighten in my folded arms, and a pain like an iron hand press my forehead. Yet scarcely a minute could have elapsed before I sat down near Miss Fortescue, and told her very quietly, but with utter certainty, that it was impossible—that May had no father but—myself.

The words sounded easy and commonplace enough. Who need ever guess the struggle that it cost me to speak of myself so to Ernest Fortescue's sister?

"It would be well indeed for May if that were so," my companion answered, "for her life has been a very happy one, I'm sure, since you have taken her father's place, as you have done indeed, Mr. Fearne; though, of course, we know there can be but about sixteen or seventeen years between you, and so it would be more suitable to speak of you as her elder brother."

"Will you tell me," I interrupted—for how could I care to hear her so discuss my child and me?—"why you had that fancy that Major Western was not dead?"

"I have," she said, with a smile, "his own word that he lives. He has written to my brother from Berlin, and speaks of being here in the course of a month. Don't think that I am unmoved by this unfortunate occurrence; I have been most troubled. But it is two days now since I heard it first."

"Then why——"

"Why did I not let you know at once?" she put in, when I paused. "Because, Mr. Fearne, it is so difficult to find you alone, out of May's sight and hearing, and because it would be such a pity for May to hear of this—yet."

This mention of my child, and my child's possible sorrow, in such a cool and studied voice, quickened my own impatient reply—that she need *never* hear of such a falsehood. But, even before the words were

uttered, I had remembered that Miss Fortescue could have no motive for speaking to me so, unless she did it on her brother's behalf. At his request she must have left her guests to speak to me alone, while my child was with him; and he, who loved my darling so well, could have begged his sister's help only for the purpose of sparing her pain. In real shame for my impatience and suspicion, I apologized to Miss Fortescue for my words. For was it any fault of hers that she could not speak of my child with such love and tenderness as filled my heart, and that she could not do her brother's bidding just as he would have done it?

"I do not wonder that your first feeling was utter incredulity, Mr. Fearne," she said, gently, accepting my apology. "It was mine too, and my brother's. Major Western's letter took us so utterly by surprise that through the whole day we never once believed in its genuineness. Perhaps we both feared too much to allow ourselves

to look into it again. At any rate we set aside that day the very possibility of such an unfortunate future for May. But we both knew it would be cowardly to avoid the truth, whatever it might be, until that truth might break upon us all the more crushingly. So—but what need to lengthen what I wish to say to you? I will give you Major Western's letter, and you will think what is wisest to do. For ourselves we see but one way to save his daughter pain and—even degradation."

"That would be impossible for May," I said, in my quiet, practical way, feeling utterly heavy-hearted to hear this word coupled with my darling's name, even by one who spoke in kindness.

"From all such feelings," she went on, with a brief, compassionate glance into my face, "we all of us would like to spare her. I have learned to feel for her almost as a sister; you, we all know, have been as a brother to her for many years; and Ernest"

—she broke off here with a smile, and shook her head—“I don’t know what to say of Ernest, except that he would give his life to keep hers free from such a pain and humiliation as this would be for her—as this *must* be, unless we insure her happiness in the only way that is possible to us.”

“And that is——”

I asked the question in a heavy, listless voice that scarcely sounded like my own. If her father really lived, and chose to claim his child, could the strength or depth or passion of our love for her withstand this claim?

“If she were married, Mr. Fearne, her father could not take her from here. She would be safely established in her mother’s home.”

The words were uttered kindly in their slow distinctness, though to me they sounded icily cruel. Yet had I not for months been preparing myself—ay, and even preparing

May too—for this future of hers, marked out to me so clearly now as wise and best? Was I to flinch at the last moment from giving my child to the life that would be so bright for her, and to the husband whom surely her own mother would have chosen?

“Will you tell me,” I asked, merely to gain time before I was brought face to face with that other question, “how Major Western explains what occurred eight years ago?”

“It is a long story, he says,” Miss Fortescue answered, quickly, as if all this were no more pleasant to her to tell than to me to hear, “and he postpones entering into full particulars until he sees us. He was tempted to practice a fraud to escape his creditors: and circumstances and chance—as well as his landlady—assisted him. He speaks lightly—indeed I may say flippantly of the transaction, and seems to think there can be but little blame attached to him, because it was, as he describes it, a desperate

emergency. He has been in hiding ever since, abroad, but now has determined to run all risks and return to England, if only to fetch his daughter. He had heard of her having been brought back here, and, I suppose, concluded unquestionably, that she had lived ever since in her grandfather's old home. It was a not unnatural fancy, was it? He found out that the house had been occupied by a Mr. Fortescue, and so wrote, as he says, directly to him about May. I can see that he fancies Mr. Fortescue an old gentleman with a wife and family, among whom May Western has been adopted and brought up as a daughter. My brother and I, Mr. Fearne, think it just as well that this should be his certainty until he comes himself, when it is to be hoped, his daughter will be beyond his governance. I'm as sure you'll be as anxious as my brother is to make quite sure of this."

I as anxious! The blood seemed boiling in my veins, and my heart ached to take my

child from this planning. Sternly I told myself that this was only my own hope for her, and what would be best for her ; the reiteration in my own thoughts, while it calmed me, only made that iron grasp upon my forehead all the heavier.

“This is so sudden,” I said, as quietly as I could. “I have scarcely yet realized it. When may I see this letter?”

“To-morrow,” Miss Fortescue answered, rising now as I had done, but pausing beside me. “My brother hopes you will give him an interview to-morrow, and allow all arrangements to be made for a speedy marriage. Then they will go abroad, and thus May will be spared this misery, you see, Mr. Fearne. When Ernest calls on you to-morrow, he will tell you——”

She was saying this to me, in a lowered, earnest voice, standing at my side, when she stopped abruptly, her eyes turning suddenly from my face. Then I, following her glance, saw my child coming toward us

along the shrubbery path, and in the same moment saw her pause and start, while the soft, bright blush I knew so well rose slowly to her very hair. In my own sad consciousness of what we had been saying, I seemed to understand this blush upon my child's wistful, questioning face; but I saw how it astonished my companion, and how she moved from my side with uncharacteristic eagerness, and spoke at once to May. But I—I could say nothing to my darling.

“I wondered where you were, John,” she said, without coming a step nearer to me. “I will go back now.”

Before she could have understood Miss Fortescue's prompt answer, the young squire had come among us in search for May and the swift smile broke upon her lips as without a moment's hesitation, she turned to walk back with him. Quite silently Miss Fortescue and I followed them, until, just as we were about to leave the shrubbery and turn into the open lawn, my compan-

ion stopped me with a touch upon my arm.

"Mr. Fearne," she said, "I'm afraid I have but awkwardly and imperfectly filled my brother's commission, or pleaded his case with you. But you yourself made it almost needless for me to do so, as you saw everything so exactly in the light in which we saw it. I may tell Ernest, may I not, that you will see him to-morrow morning, and will help him to shorten the time for any secrecy between us and May?"

"Why does he wish to see me?" I asked, in unconquerable rebellion, though I knew well there was but one favor the young squire would sue from me, in my plain, simple home.

"Your question proves how clumsy I am at explanation," Miss Fortescue said, smiling, but with a rather searching and doubtful glance up into my face. "My brother wishes to see you, Mr. Fearne, that he may win you thoroughly to his side in advocating a very early marriage between

himself and May Western. You see, do you not, that if her father finds her living simply under your guardianship, as she is now, we cannot offer the slightest resistance to his taking her with him where and when he chooses? Of course, he now has every right to do so. And it would be very hard for you, after your care of her, to send her out into such a life as that of the professional gambler, and a world that would be worse than death to a pure, shy, truthful girl like May. You are very patient with me, Mr. Fearne, while I say so much that need not be said at all, and which you understand in your thoughts so much more clearly and readily than I do myself. I'm sure that without a word of mine you saw at once the danger in which May stands, and the one sure way of escape that is open to her. If she married—and especially if she and Ernest have left England—her father's coming, even when she knows of it, will cause her very little

sorrow, and certainly no fear and misery. Even when they return, she would be safe in her husband's home here."

"Of course," I put in, with a strange, unnatural quietness, "she would be safe in her husband's home—anywhere."

"Anywhere—yes," assented Miss Fortescue, rather hastily; "but of course more so here, where Ernest's position is unquestionable and his influence so great. Then now, Mr. Fearne," she concluded, walking slowly on, "we understand each other perfectly, do we not? And we shall both guard this secret from the poor child herself, for we cannot help sparing one we love so well. Even I, who certainly do not know her as you do, feel most anxious that she shall be guarded from such a terrible fate as living with her father; and I shall leave home much more happily this winter if she is established in the position I vacate—in a higher position, I ought to say, as my brother's wife."

I knew Miss Fortescue thus alluded to her own approaching marriage, and in a vague, bewildered way I felt grateful to her for doing so. To touch upon any subject that was not my separation from my child was such a relief to me. I think I spoke of this, telling her, in my quiet, clumsy way, that I had been glad to hear of it, and wished her every happiness, and—and was grateful, I said, to feel that she would not be solitary after her brother had—married. I know now that what I said must have sounded strange to her, for, my thoughts were selfishly filled with my own solitariness; but she was very patient with me, and even showed no surprise upon her face, while she offered me her hand and gave me smiling thanks for—I suppose for what she knew that I had meant to say.

Then we sauntered out to join the other guests, among whom I looked in vain for May and Mr. Fortescue.

CHAPTER IX.

DREADING MY LONELINESS.

It was not until the children had been dismissed, and we had assembled in the great entrance hall where tea was laid for us, that I began to feel a little uneasy about my child's continued absence. Ever since that minute in which she had both joined and left us in the shrubbery, I had felt intensely lonely, even though I had purposely mixed in the crowd much more than I had done before, with a strange, absurd fancy that I might act for her perhaps in her absence. How strange it was, that intense solitariness of mine, while all the scene around me was so gay and noisy and active ! I talked to the children with ease and even merriment ; I proposed and played in one

of the best games of the evening ; I led them through the National Anthem, and helped to unite the little groups for their dismissal. I found they all laughed when I spoke to them, as if I jested, and I found them giving me especial good-byes, and I knew that I was taking May's place, and that presently I should be my own quiet, practical self again, and this dream would have passed. But then—ah, no, it did not do to think of that, for a sadder awaking was to follow ; the awaking to a loneliness of which this night must be a forecast, or—or to a sadder knowledge for my child than I could ever dare to give her.

I heard Miss Fortescue asking for her brother many times while we loitered round the tables ; but seemed to hear more clearly still—more distinctly even than the questions directly addressed to me, and which I answered with such apparent pleasure—those few words Miss Fortescue had said to me—“ I know, of course, that you

have nothing at heart more earnestly than the welfare of your adopted child." Surely when I allowed myself to think, it was my own misery I had at heart ; so—I must not think.

The lamps were being lighted in the hall, and the trees were growing dark against the sky, when some one near me, looking from the window, exclaimed that Mr. Fortescue and Miss Western were coming at last. I was glad to have heard this, for it prepared me to see them come in together, as I knew they would—he with such pride and hope in his young, handsome face, she with that soft pink color in her cheeks. I knew then that he had told her of nothing but his love, and I knew, too, by the intensity of my own relief, what had been my great fear in their absence, not that he should win my child from me, but that he should give her any motive for accepting him beyond her answering love. In all my selfishness, I loved her far too well for *that*.

Almost as surely as if I had heard him speak, I knew what the young squire had asked my child out in the gloaming, and with a smile of ready sympathy, if not of real gladness, I met the lovely eyes she shaded as she came toward me, laughing that the lamplight dazzled her.

I did not hasten her from the Hall. I let them tempt her to stay on and on, later and later, because I knew that when we had said good-night she would have only me. Not, of course, that Ernest Fortescue would ever be likely again to leave her long alone with me. And that would be well, for what a difference it would be for her—I in my humdrum quietness, he in his fervor of love and hope and happiness, hanging on every word she said, prizing every smile, able to show her in every tone and glance how much he loved her, willing already that every guest within his house should read this honest love of his as plainly as I read it.

“John, are you ever going home again?”

My darling had come up to me as I stood apart, trying to talk and laugh as I had done before her return ; and she asked the question demurely, guessing nothing, of course, of how I stayed for her sake, at the squire's so earnest request. Even now he followed her, pleading that it was very early yet, but naturally I took my child's hint.

"I was just intending to start alone," I answered her. "For hours I have been trying in vain to make you understand that it was time to leave."

"For hours, John," she answered gravely, "I have been trying in vain to signal you homeward. How fond you are of dissipation and late hours !"

"Let me drive you, Mr. Fearne," urged the young squire, when he found we were quite determined to leave.

"If May wishes it," I said ; "if she is tired." And I tried to speak as if it did not signify to me in the slightest.

"I would rather walk," May answered.

gently. "There is moonlight for us. Please let us walk."

And I think that she knew that this was what I should like best—though I had tried to prevent her thinking so—for she smiled in that grave, quiet way of hers, which always seemed to tell me that she understood me. And indeed, what wonder that my darling, with that clear gaze of hers, should see through all my clumsy subterfuges?

Then we said good-night to our host and hostess, and to the lingering guests, and May slipped her hand within my arm—as even yet it was so natural for her to do—and we started together out into the peaceful beauty of the night. And the October moon was at its full.

I had a strange, sad longing to be left in silence through that walk—a feeling most unusual with me when my child and I were together. I longed to-night only to feel her beside me, her hands locked round my arm in the old childish way, and her

pure grave face so near me in the silence.

I knew what she had to tell me, and I was covetous of this sweet, restful silence, while I tried to prepare myself for what this walk—ay, and other walks—would be to me when I might never again hear her sweet voice, or feel her clinging touch, or even have her silent presence near me.

I tried—ah, how I tried!—to fancy what going home would mean to me when I was once more utterly alone, as I was before Heaven sent my pet to me. Then I tried to feel grateful that she would even then live near me, and would be so happy. But even in this sweet, calm hour, my selfishness held stronger sway, and in my jealousy and my rebellion I grudged my darling to the man who loved her with such a different love from mine, and whose love would have such a different fulfillment. What right had he to feel it such a natural thing that he should win her from me? What right had he to ask the gift from me, as if

my life were worth no thought of others? It would be less cruel to stab me to the heart to-night than to come presently to take my treasure from me, after these dear, happy years through which she had grown so closely into my heart that to tear her from it would be worse than death.

Such bitter, selfish thoughts these were to hold on such a sweet and peaceful night, that I paused a moment in my walk, while I shook them from me, with a longing, strong as prayer, that I should prove Miss Fortescue's words true, and have indeed nothing more earnestly at heart than the welfare of my adopted child.

"John," May questioned, but with no glance of surprise at that momentary pause of mine, "you are not vexed at our not talking, are you? The silence of the night is so very, very beautiful."

All the covetous anger died from my face, when presently her eyes were lifted slowly to read my answer. All the bitter

selfishness melted from my heart as her clasp tightened on my arm. All the old bad feelings died to my darling's gentle words.

So, in silence still, but for me a different silence now, we walked on, until at last we reached that gate of the hill orchard where we always turned to give a last long look at the Hall. And, while we stood there, I broke this long, sweet silence, just softly touching the linked fingers on my arm, and speaking words that were far harder to utter than you could ever guess, but words that I hoped would help her, knowing what she had to tell.

CHAPTER X.

OVER THE FALLEN LEAVES.

“And often, May, when you are living in your mother’s beautiful old home, I shall stand just here, and picture to myself the life within.”

The old Hall lay like a picture in the moonlight, and after my long gaze I looked from it down into my darling’s thoughtful face. Her eyes had not come back to mine, nor did she answer me. But I—on this spot where her mother had rescued me from selfishness and discontent so many years before—could bury the thoughts which had been fighting me so hard that night, and could remember how I *ought* indeed, to have “nothing more earnestly at

heart than the welfare of Miss Mary's child."

"Yes, dear, often and often I shall stand here and picture you within those old gray walls; and it will all seem so real to me, my pet, that I—I shall be almost as well off as if I were there too."

"While you will take care to stay very far away yourself, John."

May said it lightly—I think because she heard my voice faltering a little, and so wished to break the pause. But I was brave to go on now, thinking only—so much easier it was upon this spot than it could have been anywhere else—of what my darling's future ought to be; the future of Miss Mary's child.

"Dear," I said, "no one has such a right to reign in that beautiful old house as you have. But don't let the grass grow upon this little field path. I would like it trodden then, dear, as we tread it now. I had it made for your mother, May—— Don't

look sad to-night, my darling"—for the old sorrow was upon her face at my mention of her mother—"I—I feel sure, dear, that not only your feet coming, but my feet going, will keep it worn and neat, as we have done lately—you and I together."

There was a long pause—to me it seemed a long, long pause—and then my child questioned me gently, looking still before her, with something glistening on her lashes.

"Did you guess, John, or—or did Mr. Fortescue tell you?"

"Neither, exactly, dear," I answered, as lightly as I could. "Mr. Fortescue made it too plain for me to guess; but he has not told me yet."

I had helped her in the telling; but I could say no more just yet. So again there was a silence between us, while we still stood against the orchard gate, looking back upon the quiet moonlit Hall and park, until at last May broke the silence, just as if she

only finished aloud the thoughts my words had given her.

“Yes, John, he asked me——”

“I know, my pet.”

“You seem to know everything.”

The tone was even a little unsteady in its impatience, and I saw that she would rather speak frankly to me than that I should anticipate all she had to tell. So I waited for her next words, though they were very long in coming,

“You wish me to—to go and live there, John?” she asked, with her wistful eyes upon the moonlit Hall.

But looking down upon her so, the answer that I wished to give her would not come.

“You wish me to go soon, John? Very soon, you seem to say.”

Still I could give no answer in this brief fit of cowardice, and so she raised her eyes and questioned me differently.

“Why do you hurry me, John? Why do you want me to go so soon?”

"I want you to be happy, dearest. That is all."

"And you think I shall be happier there?"

My cowardly hesitation was all gone now, and once more I had simply the welfare of my child at heart.

"If I did not think so, I could not let you go, my pet."

"You call it my home. You say I should be happier there," May said, with a new quiet earnestness in her tone, and a grave, direct glance into my eyes; "then why did you not call it my home when I was a child, and homeless? Why did you not say I should be happier *there*, when you first tried to make me happy years ago?"

"All is so different now," I answered, every word a pain to me in its utterance, as my thoughts went back to that dear time, and I knew that I had had the power to make her happy in her child-life—even I.

"Different? How?"

“What childish questioning, May!” I said, smiling a little, knowing that I could not answer her steadily in any other way.

“You gave me the life you thought best for me then, John. Why has it ceased to be the life you think best for me now?”

“My child,” I answered just a little brokenly—for what question in the world could she have asked me that would have been harder to answer?—“the home I gave you then was but for a little time. The one offered you now is for life.”

“How do you know?” May inquired, with a flash of sudden petulance which was most unlike her. “My mother’s old home does not belong to Ernest Fortescue. He may give it up any day. You have no more reason to suppose that that would be my home for life than you had——”

The quick, impetuous words were broken as suddenly as they were begun; and who can ever guess how grateful I was that

that impatient, childish question had been left unfinished ?

There was a little silence between us, which I could not break ; then May spoke even more gently than usual, and with a dreamy slowness.

“Yes, John, you were right. Ernest Fortescue wants me to go and live in the home my mother loved. She did love it—oh, how tenderly !”

“I know it, May.”

“Yes,” my child went on, in her quiet dreamy way, “you know it. Have you not often told me of it ? And so lovingly she used to remember it, John, that she made me—even before I had seen it—love it too. Was it strange ?”

“Strange, my darling ? It was most natural.” And then, in my old-fashioned fatherly way, I put my arm about her, as we stood there, so still in the peaceful moonlight.

“Was it strange,” she went on, unheed-

ing both my questions and my caress, "that in those dreary Paris rooms of ours the memory of such a home as—as hers had been, and of the life she led there, should be passing sweet to my mother and that I should love it too—for her sake?"

"To whatever life she might have gone, May," I said, looking down into the tender moonlit face I loved, and longing for power to brighten these sad, childish memories, "all remembrance of the life she had lived here must have been passing sweet, my pet, because her life was one of usefulness and helpfulness, and sympathy—for all."

"I could never live, even there," May said, "such a life as hers. How can I dare to take her place and be so different?"

"Leave us—leave the young squire to judge of that, my love," I said; and the words came now unbrokenly, even almost coldly, in the great strain I put upon myself.

"Yes; it was very dear to my mother,"

May went on, still in that dreamy, wondering way and still with her wistful gaze upon the beautiful home where she was wanted.

“It will be dearer still to you, my child.”

“And you can spare me, John?”

The thoughtful, quiet question came unexpectedly, even though I had for so long been reading how her pity for myself had saddened even her own new dreams to-night; yet I had tried hard too to hide any dreary glimpse of my own selfish pain. What a return for all she had been to me, that now, in her first awakening to happy love, it should be my gloomy, solitary figure which darkened the sunny picture!

“The young squire knew that I could spare you, May. Was it not plain that he was sure of that, dear, before he won your answer?”

“My answer!” she echoed, swiftly, with an entire change of tone, and even of expression, as her eyes came back from their far, rapt gaze, and flashed one frightened

glance into mine. "He did not make me answer him in such haste. All men are not so impatient as you are. I—I would have answered him if he had wished it, of course. Why not? It is but natural, as you say, that I should be very glad to take my mother's place. It—it was but a silly whim of mine to wish to speak to—you first."

"Then tell me, May," I said, quite coolly to all seeming, for I saw how, in her compassion, she had wished to break this to me as gently as possible, and I could not bear her bravery to be so much greater than my own, "when Mr. Fortescue is to come for his answer."

"To-morrow, John."

To-morrow! Only one night to pass, one sleepless night, and I should know, beyond all doubt, how soon my darling was to leave me.

"To-morrow, dear?" I repeated, almost cheerily, for she was not looking now up into my troubled face. "That is well. But

even to-night I fancy he knows pretty well what your answer is to be."

"*You do*, of course, John. You always know what is—best for me."

"And you can trust me, dear."

"I ought to do so, John, remembering how you made my happiness all the time I was—a child."

All the time she was a child! Yes, it was the simple truth as she had said it. I had made her happy while she was a child. Now she was a woman, and this was beyond my reach. Often as I had framed this very thought to myself, the few words from her own lips had a new pain for me to-night.

"Yes, dear, the old farm life was enough for you all the while you were a child, but now you are ready to take your place among the ladies of the county, as your mother did. How glad the thought would have made her! I like to fancy it."

"Do you?" my child asked me, in a cold.

sad way, so impossible was it to her to hear, even yet, as an ordinary speech, any one which touched her mother's name. "Do you really like to fancy it?"

And once more—but for the last time—I was a coward in my heart, and turned my face away, and could not answer. Then in the silence there swept over me all I had heard that day—of the sorrow and the humiliation that threatened my child; of the cloud that—if we did not stay it—would come between her and the sunlight forevermore; of the cruel and degrading story which might be told her soon to poison the purity and freshness of her nature, of the life of fraud and sin which soon must overshadow her, and leave its taint upon her, unless I, who loved her, gave her up without hesitation and delay to the man she loved. And so well I loved her that, after those few moments of silence, I was strong to do it.

"May, darling, do you trust me that

what my heart is set upon is for your good?"

"Yes, John," she answered simply, but so earnestly.

"Then, dear one, it seems best to me, as well as to Ernest Fortescue, that you should—should go and live in your mother's old home."

"You wish me to go?"

"Yes."

I did not try to make that answer longer. I only tried to say it as steadily and clearly as I could.

"Then I will go."

"What, May? What, my dearest?"

I could not help that eager questioning. It was not because I had not heard her answer, though it had been spoken so low, and with her head turned from me. It was only because, even now at the last, I fought feebly against the certainty that my house was to be left to me so desolate.

Slowly she raised her head and met my

eyes. Some look in them—perhaps a shade of their old loneliness stealing back—filled hers with pity; and for that moment our gaze was steadfast and sad—mine with a yearning tenderness, hers with a yearning compassion.

“As you wish it,” she said then, very quietly; “and, as he asks me, I will go. He need not have waited for to-morrow. It is all smooth for him and—for me. I make the promise now—and here. I will go.”

I read the great truthfulness within her eyes, and even in that moment of my own despair I drew her closely to my side and thanked her. I knew then how faithfully my child would keep this promise, just as I know now how faithfully she kept it.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DAY'S TURMOIL.

Though so many years have passed me since that night, I still remember most vividly how its miserable hours crept by, and how eagerly I watched for the first sign of dawn, that I might escape from the house, and perhaps from a little of the burden of my pain. Yet would the coming day be easier to bear than this restless, feverish night? Must I not pass through every hour of that new day which would seem endless to me, yet must so soon be over, and then would leave my child and me upon the eve of parting? Would not all its hours drag as these long night

hours had done ; and yet would I not hold them if I could, because, after they had passed, I should know so surely the old solitude? True, my child would be with me still for a little time, but would she not be listening ever for a coming step and looking out upon another home?

At last the dawn broke faint and chill above the eastern hills, and I rose and left the house, in the wild, vain hope of wearing out my misery by bodily fatigue. But my thoughts would not travel with me, and clung resistlessly about that one selfish consciousness which had made the night so long.

The day had come, indeed, which was to part me from my child. To-day her lover would come, and listen while she promised him to leave me at his bidding. To-day she would tell me, just with her old caress—ay, even with tears, perhaps in pity for the grim and solitary life to which she left me—that she has kept her promise,

and would very soon be Ernest Fortescue's wife.

And it was all well, so I said to myself, rapidly and determinately, as I walked on and on. Perhaps, in her kindness and her pity for me, she would have stayed a little longer in the old farm, remembering it had been her home when there had been no other open. But could I accept what in her unmeasured, childlike gratitude she would, I know, have given so willingly? Could I let her run even the faintest risk of her life being sacrificed, in my own greedy longing for her sweet, bright presence in my home? Could I—even though she would say no word in dissent—keep her one day longer than I need do, from the man whose love would give her all that I would have forfeited my life to give her? Ah me! had I not forfeited now all that was even dearer than my life?

I must have walked as rapidly as my thoughts were traveling; for when, on my

return to the farm, May met me at the gate, she started, I remember, when she looked into my face.

"I have been for a stroll in the woods, dear," I said, with a smile for her, as I answered one of the childish questions that always came so naturally from her—where had I been?

"To the woods?" she echoed, slipping her hand into mine, as we walked up the garden. "You are always very fond of the shadows, John, And"—her eyes were full of happiness this morning, and looked up laughingly into mine—"what a long stroll you must have had since four o'clock!"

She had heard me leave the house, then, cautious and quiet as I had been.

"All good little girls should have been sleeping then," I said, remembering how I had fancied her sleeping calmly, wrapped in her new happiness.

"I am not a good little girl, John. I would rather have been with you."

But I was grateful that she had not been with me through those four heavy hours, even though the hours that she could spend with me had grown so few.

I remember that we breakfasted together that morning almost as cheerfully as we had ever done—so well had my solitary walk prepared me for this hour. Even when I had risen to go, I lingered still, while May, as usual, hovered near me; and when my saddled horse was brought to the door, she came out with me, her hands clasped round my arm as I loved to feel them, and just as she had seen me off every morning for ten happy years. But I sent the horse away. I must walk to-day, or thought would be unbearable. I turned at the last moment and spoke to May, as easily as I could, words to which I had been schooling myself all the morning.

“I suppose the young squire will be down here quite early, May?”

“I suppose so.”

Her answer was just as tranquil as my question, and her head was turned a little from me.

“But there is no fear that he will not wait for my return, dear?”

“I suppose not.”

“So I need not hasten back. He will only thank me for keeping him waiting.”

I said this with the feeble intention of bringing a smile to my child's pale face; but I did not wonder that I failed, for it was but a heavy speech after all, and uttered heavily. Could any words hide from her that dreary consciousness of mine that, after to-day, they two would be all in all to each other, and I one alone?

“John,” May said, dropping now, in a quick, careless way, this subject, which indeed we had settled between us last night at the orchard gate, “those ceaseless games of yesterday have tired me completely; so I shall rest at home to-day. Now good-by.”

I knew she stood watching me as I

walked slowly from the house, but I could not turn to smile on her again. Things that had for so long been easy and natural to me were growing impossible, in this restless, envious pain, against which I fought so hard and vainly.

In my rapid walk around the farm I had come into the yard. Here the men were at work on the threshing-machine, and I joined them eagerly. Perhaps, if my hands were busy, my head might be eased of this continuous throbbing pain. Swift walking had not killed it; but hard manual labor might possibly give me temporary forgetfulness of the keen, mental pain.

The horses were marching steadily in their circle, for we had no threshing by steam in those days, and I took his task first from one man, then from another, following it always with double the haste and energy he had thought sufficient. And I laughed a little when I heard the men whispering how fearless the master was in man-

aging the great engine, wondering what they would have said could they have known how far from fearless I really was that morning.

I spent upon this constant labor all the strength and energy that I possessed, trying whether thought might not be at last exhausted by sheer physical weariness. I must have been about three hours in the yard, and was still courting the labor, which must in reality already have wearied me, when I caught sight of Mr. Fortescue riding quickly up the lawn to the house. I turned my eyes away again in a moment; then suddenly I ordered the man who was feeding the machine to hasten to the house and hold the squire's horse, while I took his place myself. I don't know why I did this, for Ernest Fortescue would always most willingly and pleasantly stable his own horse when he did not see one of the men about. I suppose that it was only a spontaneous outcome of this great restlessness of

mine, which sought for any physical vent.

As I worked on, feeding the hungry monster, I counted the handfuls that I gave it, just simply that I might not morbidly follow in my thoughts that interview between my child and her lover. But the effort was of no use. The scene acted itself ceaselessly in my brain. Now once more, and for the last time, the young man had asked that question which he had every right to ask. Now his happiness must be complete, for May had answered him, without a further fear of grieving me. And now my child was a promised wife; for had she not told him, with that soft bright blush upon her face?

Wildly and ceaselessly the very words of her promise formed themselves in my brain, and all the time, in my effort to drown them, I worked on without a pause. But at last the corn was all threshed, and I called to the driver to check the horses. As he did so, I gathered up the few remaining

heads of wheat, and absently, with my left hand, dropped them into the machine. Just at that instant, for behind me, I heard my child's voice calling for me. I turned quickly to answer her—very quickly, for she should have my readiest and most loving sympathy in her joy to-day—and, as I knew she would not be likely to look for me here, I called my answer, very loudly as well as cheerily. In answer, as it were, to the sound of my raised voice, the horses made a spring forward to fall into their old routine of labor, and the powerful drum spun round and caught and crushed my arm.

I understood all this as it happened, scarcely more than momentary as it was, and I remember a strange, swift sensation, as if I saw the old farm empty, and heard my darling's sobs.

Then there fell the darkness of death upon my life.

CHAPTER XII.

AFTER THE DAY'S TURMOIL.

There was the warm and pleasant glow of firelight on the walls and curtains, and the pure sweet scent of autumn violets in my low, old-fashioned dressing-room. There was a peaceful stillness all around me, as I lay propped upon my pillows. For, though May's low chair stood empty beside my wide old couch—as I knew that it must stand all the coming years—she had not yet left me for always. She had only a few minutes ago been summoned from my side, and presently she would return.

I was coming slowly back to life after a long, fierce struggle; but I think, in my helplessness, I had gathered a better

strength than that which I had lost. Not once all through my long illness, nor even through this slow convalescence, had May ever spoken of our parting, and I had waited, not in cowardice now, only to be quite sure that the envy and discontent of my thoughts were gone. But now at last I knew how steadily I could speak to her of her own happiness, and pray God to bless her in her new life, as her grateful, faithful guardian should.

I would wait no longer, for many, many days had passed since the October morning when she had run to seek me, that my congratulations might be the first she should receive. And I had never been able to give them even yet!

I lay watching for her return, shrinking no longer from the future; only recalling what my child had been to me through all these weeks of suffering. Never once could I remember having wished for her in vain, having watched for her without her coming;

having listened for her voice without its bright, sweet greeting falling on my ear; or having looked into her dear eyes without their great tenderness and bravery soothing me, however worn and fretful I might have been.

Of course I knew to whom she had been summoned now, and I was glad for her to be tempted from her weary confinement with the sick man, beside whom she had kept so faithful a watch, and to be cheered and rested by the one who had sole right to soothe and cheer her now. How well it was that my child had another guardian; for mine must be a useless life now for many months to come.

“Here I am, John.”

May was in her own low seat beside me once again, and she took my one uninjured hand between both of hers as she spoke.

“You haven’t looked at the papers, John, or opened your book. Next time I go away I shall tell Mrs. Scott”—Mrs. Scott

was my housekeeper and had been with me even before my child came to me—"that she must sit with you, even if you try to send her away. She always was more obedient to me than to you. Why are you always, always thinking when—I am not here?"

"Perhaps because it is so impossible to think while you are here. But I have finished now, dear," I went on, and, while I looked into her sweet, impassionate eyes, just on a level with my own, I could even smile a little. "So let us talk. May, you remember the day when this happened?"

Her eyes followed mine, down to the disabled hand, and then for all answer she laid her cheek upon it for one instant.

"May, that was the day that Mr. Fortescue came here for your answer to that question we had settled at the orchard gate the night before. You see how well I remember it all now, dear?"

"Yes, John. May I read to you a little?"

"And of course I know, my darling, what your answer was, and how glad he was to hear it. I watched him come that morning. I remember how quickly he rode."

"Don't try your memory yet, John," May put in most wistfully. "Let me read."

"And then I heard your voice calling me, May—so cheerily, dear. Sometimes the tone has come back to me since. I was so glad to feel that you sought me first in your happiness. You see how well I remember it all?"

"Yes. Now I'm going to read you the funniest thing you ever heard."

But I could not let her put me off any longer. I felt so strong to-day, and was so doubtful of myself for the future.

"You gave him your answer on that morning, May?"

"Yes."

It was a very low and quiet answer, and my child shyly bent to hide the blush that rose so slowly and so prettily into her lifted

face. But now I could not let her sorrow for me, or her sweet sympathy, come between us in her happiness.

"I know what it was. I remember so well what you said in the moonlight, as we came home, that I know of course, what your answer was, May."

"Yes, you know."

"You told me," I persisted—for I knew it would all feel a little brighter to my child when she was convinced how perfectly I understood that I was soon to be alone—"how you were going to live in the home your mother loved."

"Yes, I told you."

"And after you had told me, May"—she had raised her head again now, but her eyes had not yet come back to mine—"you told the squire. You promised to be his wife."

The words came with no evidence of the struggle they had cost; and I knew this

beyond a doubt, when May looked straight into my eyes with her frank, clear gaze.

“Yes, John. When he came that morning, I promised to be his wife. Had I not said I would?”

“Ah, my child, my pet, you will be very happy in your mother’s home! It will be the best and brightest life for you. But dear, you will try to love the memory of these sweet, childish days, for—for your old guardian’s sake.

“I can do nothing for my old guardian’s sake,” May said, in her quaint, gentle way, “until he is old. How anxious you are to make your guardianship a thing of the past!”

“It was needed only for a little while, you see, dear.”

“And how anxious you are, John, to prove to me that I never was meant to be more than a bird of passage in this dear old home——”

“It *has* been dear to you?” I questioned.

eagerly and almost jealously. "It has been really dear to you, May, in—the old times?"

"Nothing could have made it dearer," she said, her eyes shining wistfully through gathering tears.

Then there was a little silence, while I felt what a good thought this would be for me, whether I recovered, and lived through the long years without my dear companion, or whether—as I knew they thought it possible—my life should stretch only through a few months of the future. What a good thought!

Presently May broke the silence, almost more quietly than she had spoken yet.

"John, Mr. Fortescue is here, and would like to see you. May he come in?"

This is what I had been expecting, and, though I was quite prepared now to hear his happy story from his own lips, I only nodded to May, as if Ernest Fortescue's coming in to speak to me were a most

natural and trifling matter. Then she rose and went away to fetch him, while I waited, preparing myself for the joy there would be upon his face when he and May should come in to me together.

Yet, when he came, May was not with him. Even in this minute she was trying how she could make it easier for me.

CHAPTER XIII.

FAREWELL.

For many minutes the young squire stood talking to me, kindly and sympathetically, of my long illness; then he sat down opposite to me, and spoke of little things that had occurred in the village since my absence; then of general matters; until, stooping a little as he sat, and with his eyes upon the fire, he paused, as if quite suddenly all subjects of conversation had failed him. I had seen how, in his compassion for me, he had avoided any mention of his own prospects, even of May's name; but I could not let that go on. He must know that even in my weakness I did not shrink from witnessing his happiness. He must

know how fully satisfied I was about my child's future with him. So I began to tell him this, but, when I detected the struggle in my own tones, and remembered how ill I must be looking, I was but little surprised that he himself should look so pained, and try to silence me.

"My sister's marriage is to take place next week, and in London," he said, never seeming to think the words irrelevant; "and we go to town to-morrow, Mr. Fearne. I was very anxious to see you before I left, to be quite sure you were really recovering."

I remember being a little puzzled by his manner; but I was far more troubled by the thought of his going away just now, and leaving May to the confinement from which he alone could successfully rescue her.

"Shall you be many days away?" I asked him presently, while he still sat stooping

forward, his eyes lowered now from the fire to the carpet at his feet.

"I shall not return," he answered, most quietly. "I have given up my tenure of the Hall."

I felt my heart beat so hurriedly and irregularly that I could not breathe even the one question which seemed echoing helplessly in my brain, and mocking me in the warm, still silence. I could only lie in my great weakness and wait for what he would tell me—wait a long, long time, as it seemed to me, while his moody eyes were still upon the floor.

I think it was the noisy dropping of a cider, breaking that unnatural silence of the room, that made him speak to me at last, rousing himself suddenly from his long reverie.

"After my sister's marriage I intend to leave England, and I may be away for a year or more."

"But you will surely return here?"

"No ; I have no intention of doing so."

The questions, as well as their answers, had been brief, and even cold ; but I think that with him, as with me, their coldness hid a wonderful restlessness.

"I thought you were fond of the Hall, and—and the neighborhood, Mr. Fortescue?" I said presently, with a great effort.

"I was," he answered, rising now, and slowly pacing my room. "I have been, but that is over, and if I stayed there now I should soon grow to hate the place."

"But when May——"

I could get no further in my question, but it was not my own cowardice that stopped me this time ; it was Ernest Fortescue's hasty signal to me.

"Need we speak of her?" he asked, with a catching in his voice.

Then for the first time in my life a strange feeling came over me, of being apart from my child and from her lover—far apart from them, in a quietness which

could not touch them. And for the first time my feeling for Ernest Fortescue was one of anxious sympathy, and I forgot how high he stood above me, possessing every gift of attraction which all my life long I had lacked. And now, without any pondering of the question I knew it would be better for him that we should speak of her, though he had begged me not, and that, if I could help him at all, it could be only after hearing the truth from him. So—a little faltering, I fear—I told him that, as we came home from the Hall on the night before my accident, May and I had spoken together of his offer to my child, and—and she had told me that she would be his wife; and we had spoken of what a happy life she would lead in the home that used to be her mother's.

I watched his face as I spoke, expecting to see it change and brighten, but its utter despondency was unbroken, even when, after a few seconds' pause, he answered me :

"She did not accept my love—next day. You would not remember, Mr. Fearne, how next morning I came down here for her answer—"

"Yes, I remember," I put in quite steadily. "Do not fear to speak to me of that day—now. My pain has almost left me. On that morning you came for my child's answer to the question you had asked her the night before. I knew quite well what her answer was to be."

"Yes, her answer then was a very happy one for me," the young man said, with quiet earnestness; "but then came the grief for us all in your accident."

"And in her affection and her pity for me," I put in, when he paused, still trying to speak steadily of that day, "she set aside her own pleasure, and even yours, Mr. Fortescue, that, in my suffering, she might minister to mine. Heaven bless her! Can you not see, as I do, how unselfish and compassionate she has been?"

"I thought it was so at first," the young squire answered heavily; and so I waited and hoped. But she would not let me hope. She said she feared I waited, and she would not let me wait. She would speak very truthfully, she said; and would I please to understand and forgive her? Whatever injury she had done me I must have forgiven her when she so wistfully asked me, with her eyes so full of sorrow for—us all, I think."

"Yes, for us all," I said, seizing eagerly upon his words, "but most for me. She is so good to me, so true to me, she would not let herself be happy while I lay so near death."

"It was not that," young Fortescue said, standing beside my couch a minute. "If it had been a question of waiting, I could have waited cheerfully. But it was quite different. She had utterly changed to me even in one day, and she gave me no hope at all"

How could he be so blind? I asked myself, until I remember how impossible it was that he could know her as I did—I, who from her childhood had been so used to see her give up any pleasure for herself, if by so doing she could give the slightest pleasure to me.

How plainly I read it all now! She would have no happiness for herself while I lay maimed and suffering. She would not consent to leave me when possibly mine might be a helpless, solitary future which she, by her devotion and self-sacrifice, could cheer and soothe. This had been her brave and pitiful decision, and I alone must rescue her from it. While my heart beat even painfully at the thought of her compassion for me, I was firmly determined that I would no longer allow myself to stand in the way of her happiness, and let the shadow of my helplessness and solitude mar her sunny prospects.

"Mr. Fortescue," I asked—and I myself

could easily detect a new tone in my voice in spite of its earnestness, a tone almost of hopelessness—"will you tell me whether May has heard anything of that letter you received, from her father, or—of any motive for our hastening her—her marriage?"

"No," he answered, readily. "Of course I have told her nothing. How could I hurt her so?"

"And have you heard from Major Western again?"

"More than once. He speaks of being over here very soon. What would I not give, even now, if I could keep this knowledge from May!"

Ah, what would not I have given too! Yet on me must devolve the task of telling her, and telling her now, while she was giving up so much for my sake.

"Perhaps it is not wise to keep it from her," I said, bowing my head in my hands in utter weariness. "I will tell her. And I will release her from her devotion to me. When—when may I see you again, M' Fortescue?"

"I meant this to be my last visit," he said; but his face was less troubled now. "I felt that I could not venture here again. You can scarcely guess how hard it was to-day."

"Yes, I can guess," I answered, quietly.

It was at that very moment that the door was opened, and May came softly in to us, looking wonderfully pale and gentle in the fire-light. I saw in a moment that she had come fancying I was alone again, and that she was sorry now, and would fain have gone back if she could have done so without question. But it was too late. While

the old gladness that I always felt to see her swallowed even the great dread of grieving her, I held out my hand and waited for hers.

CHAPTER XIV.

MY LAST EFFORT.

Instead of sitting down beside me, as she had done all through my illness, it seeming such a natural spot for her, she went up to the hearth, and stood looking down into the fire, as if she had not come to stay at all; and, as she did so, Ernest Fortescue went up and stood opposite her; and for a few moments I watched them standing there in the fire-light. Was it not in my power to-day to bring them together, as they had been before my accident?

"May," I said, when I felt quite sure that I could break my silence steadily, "will you listen to a few words I want to say to you before Mr. Fortescue leaves? Is there not some mistake, dear, in his coming to bid me good-by?"

"I knew he was going away," she answered, rather sadly, and without looking up. "He told me."

For a moment then I wildly wished that I had let him go before I spoke to her. I wished that she and I could have been alone together before I need tell her what I had determined it was right for her to hear. But presently again, I knew that it was better as it was. The young lover's presence gave me strength to speak as my child's guardian only—a thoughtful guardian who had only her welfare at his heart.

"Dear," I said, looking earnestly into her

face, though it was not turned toward me, "I do not ask you why he goes. I know too well how constantly you have waited on me in my illness, and how willingly you would give up your own pleasure for that of others. I only want to tell you that there is a reason for your giving up all this sacrifice for me, and letting Ernest Fortescue claim the wife who, not very long ago, promised herself to him."

She had turned her head now, and was looking into my face, gravely and anxiously; but I don't think she could see any trouble upon it then which she had lately seen so very often.

"I have told Ernest the truth," she said, simply. "He understands."

"I will not force you to repeat anything you have said to me, May," he put in, gently. "But perhaps it is well for you to

hear from Mr. Fearne what I have—have feared to tell you.”

“If you know what it is,” May said to him, almost appealingly, “will you tell me, please, Ernest? I will listen quite patiently to you, if I need really listen to this at all. John is so weak and tired. Surely, he may rest?”

“May,” I went on, turning my eyes from her wistful face that I might speak the more calmly, “suppose that a misfortune threatened—Ernest, from which only his speedy marriage with you could successfully free him. Suppose only these two courses lay before him—one to wed the girl he loves, and has loved for years—to take her to lovely countries she has often longed to see and then to bring her back to the happiest home in the world, and—as the story books say—live happy ever after; the other—are

you listening dear, though I cannot see your face?"

"Yes, John."

"The other to give up this happy married life, for the sake of a fancied duty elsewhere—only a fancied duty, May; with his own hand to destroy the happy future, not only of himself, but of one he loves, and to bring upon himself—if you could but understand me dear!—an infamous career from which all his nature would revolt. Ought he to hesitate with such a choice before him, May?"

"I do not understand," she said, questioning not me, but Mr. Fortescue, her face very pale and grave. "Does such a future threaten *you*, Ernest? Have you such a choice to make?"

"That is the choice," he answered, with a rather nervous glance at me. "Your de-

cision will determine which of these futures is to be—ours.”

“But a man has such power over his own life,” she said, almost whispering it in her great thoughtfulness. “He need not—he need not live an—an infamous career—you called it so.”

No wonder that, in that pitiful, searching glance of hers, she should read some glimmering of the truth, when the crimson rushed so hotly to the very roots of his hair. First her gaze grew a little bewildered, then she suddenly turned away from him, and came and knelt beside my couch, looking straight into my eyes.

“What do you mean, John? What is the disgrace that threatens *me*? It cannot be you. It cannot be Ernest. It is my name that—that is not unblemished like yours—and his. Tell me the truth.”

“May, my child, why should you suspect——”

“It is not suspicion ; it is certainty,” she said, in a strange, steady way. “Not that my life will ever be discreditable to you, but that you fear something for me, from which you would guard me, in your great kindness and affection for me. You have never yet denied me anything I asked, John ; oh, don’t deny me now ! I can bear anything you tell me. Why should you doubt me so ? Why,” she said, tears starting at last into her pleading eyes, “should you treat me as if I were a child ?”

And so, without another single doubt as to what had been right or what wrong, only with the old consciousness that her choice was always best, her decisions always wisest, I told her the simple truth ; covering my

eyes while I spoke, not because it was so hard to meet her steadfast, wistful gaze, but because I dared not see it fall at last in her humiliation.

I told her slowly, but in a few words ; and then I waited, fearing to hear, though I could not see, the sorrow of my child. But I need not have feared. She heard my story to the very end, and then she rose, and, leaving my side, leaned upon the end of my couch, where I could not see her face.

“Mr. Fortescue,” she said, just in her own gentle tones, “have you those letters which are *forged* in my father’s name?”

“I hope it is so,” replied the young squire, eagerly seizing her idea, while he overlooked her question. “We hoped so most earnestly ; but—but he has proved

himself really—the writer I mean—Major Western.”

“Impossible,” May answered with quiet, proud conviction in her pausing tone. “My father died when—when my mother and I were together. And that day madame—I never heard her other name, but we lodged in her house—took me while my mother slept, to the house, and I saw him. I could not have gone if I had known. She took me, unknowing whither I went. But I saw—my father—dead. My mother cried bitterly when she found where I had been. But I could not cry. It was too terrible. Who can he be who pretends now to be my father?”

“I will show you the letters,” the young squire said; but I could see that it was difficult to him to believe what had become certainty in my mind while May spoke.

"If this be a fraud, I will spare no pains to sift and expose it."

"No, please," my child said, gently. "You have been annoyed too much already by what ought never to have been allowed to vex any one but myself. I know what a trouble I have been for many years to my own guardian; but no one indeed had any right to make me the cause of worry and anxiety to *you*, Mr. Fortescue."

He interrupted her eagerly; but I fancied she hardly heard what he said, while she stood waiting, so pale and still, and with such a tale of patient sadness in her clasped white hands.

"Thank you," she said, when he had finished. "It is very good of you to say these things, because I know you would not say them unless you really felt them,

and it shows how kind you have always been to me. But—please forgive me for speaking just what I feel to-night—I have had no time to be prepared for—for what I have just heard. Please let me do what is—what is surely my duty alone. May I have those letters soon, and I will write to the—the writer of them?”

“Who can he be?” put in young Fortescue, for the first time moving from his position on the rug, as if he felt that May had in some way made him understand that she had said all she had strength to say.

“In those long-ago days,” she said, a little brokenly, “my father had—a servant who was not like a servant—at least he got a certain power over my father, and led him——”

“Hush, May!” I cried, rising instantly

in my great weakness, broken-hearted to hear my child speak so to us, who had no right to hear this from her brave young lips. "Hush, my child. Forget that time. Remember only how we wish to spare you now—we who love you."

For a moment she looked into my face with a terrified glance, fearing only for me; then her head fell upon my arm, as sometimes it had done in those old days when, as a little child, she had grown sad in talking to me of her mother; and the tears were as quietly shed to-night as they had been in that strange, grave sadness of her childhood—as naturally shed, there beside me, as I felt most gratefully—as if she put me willingly into the place of the mother whose loss had come back to her to-night with a new sorrow.

I don't know whether we spoke to each

other through those few moments, before May raised her head again, and quietly offered her hand to Ernest Fortescue.

“It was a kind thought,” she said, steadying her voice by a great effort, “of yours and of my guardian’s, to wish to place me beyond the reach of—of even my father’s authority, and I shall always remember how nobly you did it, wishing me not to know of any threatened humiliation. But it is over now, and if I may, I will write the truth to that man, and—and ask my guardian to—to forget it all and—let me still be his adopted child, and—and not so much trouble as I have been before.”

Ah, was it any wonder that the thought of this happiness to me just then, in my feebleness, unstrung and exhausted as I was, should unman me, even as the fear of my child’s loss had never done? For a

moment the room seemed to reel before me. I felt my child's hands seize mine one moment, heard her swift, low cry, and then—
*+ was all darkness.

CHAPTER XV.

MAY'S HOME.

Ernest Fortescue had been to bid us farewell again, as he left for town that day. May had gone from the room with him, and I lay waiting for her return. The fear that had been so intense with me before had died now, for May had detected at once the imposition that had been practiced upon Mr. Fortescue, in hope, as we supposed, of winning money from him for silence. And now there was again no shadow upon my child's

future, and, if Ernest Fortescue waited a little——

Just as my thoughts paused there, she came back to me; entering very quietly, and passing her empty chair, she moved softly about the room, I watching her in the firelight. And when she had no more excuse for passing by my call, she came up to the head of my couch, and leaned behind me, there where I could not see her face.

“So, May,” I said, as easy and naturally as I could, “the old Hall is to be vacant again for a time. Dear,” I went on, presently, for she had not answered me, “when do you think the young squire will return?”

“Never, John.”

“But, May,” I cried, with a failing at-

tempt to turn and read her face, "do you forget your promise to me?"

"I kept it, John," my child said, gently.

"He came for my answer that morning, and I said—what I promised I would say. I did, indeed."

"And why——"

"That very day, afterward," my darling said, trying to calm me with her gentle touch upon my shoulder, "I asked him to forgive me for—not understanding—myself. And he was generous and forgave me."

"Oh, my love, and this was because I fell into a useless, helpless nursling, and let you sacrifice your time and health and liberty! Are you to forfeit *all* to me—even your happiness?"

"No, John. Oh, no! I consented to go to my mother's home because you

seemed so much to wish it, and said it was best for me. And I was sure you knew, because you had *always* done what was best for me. I never guessed how soon I should understand enough to be quite sure that, in your great kindness to me, you had mistaken. I told him this, and he was very patient with me, John."

"And you sacrificed yourself so utterly, my darling, for your old guardian's sake?"

"Hush!" my child whispered, very low and earnest. "It was no sacrifice. Don't you remember how I said to you even then, John, 'If my own home is dearer to me than my mother's, why should I change?'"

"Oh! May," I cried, "tell me in few words, but in true words, that I may understand, even while I cannot see your

face—is that true? Is the old home dearer to you than your mother's?"

"Yes."

"And even Ernest Fortescue——"

"Knows," my child answered, very softly in my pause, "and has known for many weeks, that I could never love the life he offered me as I have loved the old life here. And," my child went on with a sudden change of tone, and laying her fingers softly on my forehead, as if she knew how it was throbbing with an unfamiliar pain, "I don't know how I am to keep my promise to you now, John, for my mother's home is to be empty."

"Some one else will come," I said, with a fierce grasp of my failing strength: "and, whoever he may be, he is sure to want to steal you from me. They all have

wanted to do so. Even if the mysterious old owner comes himself, he will be sure to ask for you presently. I shall get used to it, I suppose, in time."

"It is to be hoped he will come, as I have to keep my promise," remarked my child.

"Yes, and it will be easier then, as he will really own the Hall. And suppose he were as handsome as Ernest Fortescue, and as good a man, and as pleasant, and as clever, and as rich, and as young, could you resist him then if he asked you that old question? Would you accept the home that used to be your mother's?"

"Yes, I could resist him, John, even then."

"You would say——"

"I should say, 'Please leave me at the farm, for I am happiest there.'"

"And suppose," I went on, my heart beating with a pain in every throb, though I tried so hard to speak lightly—"never mind how silly my words sound, May—suppose when he came he dared to ask you the same question, yet was not such a one as Ernest Fortescue; was not handsome, and good and pleasant, and clever, and rich, and young, but was even such a one as—myself?"

"He could not be."

"Scarcely," I acknowledged brokenly. "But try to suppose he were, and yet asked you to—to accept his home."

"Then I should say"—I could not see my child's eyes, but I heard the faltering of her sweet low voice—"I will come."

"I am not jesting, May," I cried. "Oh,

do not jest to me in your answer! If he were such as myself?"

"I understand you, John. It is an impossible case. But if it were possible, I should say, 'I will come.' The Hall and the farm would be the same to me then."

"Oh, my darling, remember this to be the truth! With such a one as myself?"

"With such one," she said, and smiled a little as she came to my side and held out both her hands. "I could be happy anywhere."

"Oh, May," I cried, and drew her to me with my unmaimed hand, that she might not see the womanish tears, "think what this means, the hope that you are giving me! Tell me, could you live happily in your mother's home—with me?"

“Have I not always lived happily with you, my own dear guardian?”

“But—oh, my child, try to understand me, for this hope is so strange and strong! could you live happily in the old home your mother loved—as my—wife?”

I think that something of the great strength and humility of my love had been written in my face, for her eyes were lowered, and her lips trembled as I spoke. But when she looked up to answer me, I saw a new look upon her face, and, ah me, such a warmth and tenderness in her lovely eyes!

“I don’t know, John. But I could try.”

“Oh, my love, my love!” I whispered. And then I could say no other word, so

weak I was, and so unfitted with any words for my great gratitude.

“You have talked too much this evening, John. Now let us sit quite still and rest.”

My darling was on her own little chair beside my couch, and she leaned her cheek against it, as she sat so still in the fire-light; while I held her hand in mine, and watched the bright and happy face, with that nameless love and pride and gratitude.

“In a few moments, darling. It seems a dream to me yet, that you have consented to stay with me all your life. Yet you must keep that promise you

made me, May, one night in the moonlight."

"Then you must tell me how."

"You must go, my love, and take your mother's place in the dear old home she loved."

"Not without you, John."

I laughed a little. It was so exactly what she used to say to me when I would try to persuade her to accept those urgent invitations that came to her from the Hall. And it was such a jest as she said it now.

"No; not without me, dear. I can never spare you to go anywhere without me now."

"So you see you will be obliged to release me from that promise, John."

"Yes, dear, if you wish it. But the home that was your mother's is yours now,

May. I—I bought it to give as a wedding gift to my child. I used to dream how, on your wedding morning, I would tell you and Ernest that the old home was yours, bought long ago with Uncle Joshua's wonderful savings. I had bought it for you—such a slight return from your old guardian for the happy years you had given him. Yet now——”

“Now, John, for the first time in my life—let me confess it at last,” interrupted May, “I have always been so afraid of doing so—for the first time in my life, at this moment, I love the old home just as you have always so easily taken it for granted that I should love it, while you were building my future for me.”

“And while you——”

“While I,” she said—and there stole into her cheeks the soft pink color that

bore a different message for me now—"knew that this future could never satisfy me. Oh, John, how I should have clung to these last days with you, if I had really been going away?"

It was no dream, no jest. It was not compassion in her face. It was something that never, even through one hour of her sweet, childish life, had I felt possible. Something that made me look back with keen self-pity for the man who had never dreamed of such an hour for himself as this.

"May, darling"—it was but a broken whisper after all, while I lifted the bright face to mine, just as I used to do when she was a tiny child—"you have not told me that you accept that gift of mine. If you could but know what delight it has

been to me to fancy your acceptance of it—my one gift to my child !”

“Your one gift to your child. John,” she said, taking my one hand, big as it was, into both of hers, as I believe she could not have done a month before, “has been what I could never put into words. But I will tell you of it sometimes on other days, This last gift is not to be mine yet. You know when you said you intended to give it me.”

“You will take it from me on—on our wedding-day, my love ?”

“Yes ; not till then. To-day I have taken enough. Oh, John, what happiness is in my soul to-night !”

“Dear, if you only knew what you have given me !”

“Nothing,” she whispered, with her dear, truthful eyes lifted to mine. “All that you

have of mine I gave you long ago—un-asked.”

And then I think that I tried to tell her a little of what she had been to me since first I brought my little blessing into the solitary home. But she would not listen.

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